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AFRICAN-AMERICAN DRAMATIC THEORY AS SUBJECT OF CULTURAL STUDIES: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in

the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

by

Michael L. Pinkney; B.A., M.A.

* * * * *

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ABSTRACT

This study is an historical overview of written theories and manifestoes created to encourage the development of African-American theatre. Beginning with the premise that African-American performance began as a forced "public" act on the slave ships of the Middle Passage and that minstrelsy was an originating institutional frame, by mapping a chronological history of social ideas the study demonstrates an evolved history of theoretical ideas and a tradition of spiritual awareness, sensibility and purpose associated with the development of African-American theatre in the United States. It concludes that African-American theatre is an American sociocultural phenomenon born of historical conflict, has served both public and private functions within the larger society and has been on a continuous quest for self identification and self expressive freedom.

This historical survey of aesthetic theories concerning African-American theatre has revealed five essential elements or fundamentals of African-American theatre; protest, revolt, assertion, music and spirituality. It has also revealed seven distinctive eras or periods of development; the

plantation era, the minstrel era, the "new Negro era, the assimilationist era, the Black Power/Black Arts/ Black Revolutionary era, the Revolutionary-Afrocentric era, and ends with the identification and justification of a Post-Revolutionary era.

The seventh era, the Post-Revolutionary, presents ideological aesthetic principles highlighted in an aesthetic declaration as published in Black Theatre's Unprecedented Times, a report of two National Black Theatre Summit events convened in 1998 by playwright August Wilson. The study concludes with a suggestion for African-American theatre artists to take advantage of the present "millennium moment" to establish their own ideological modes of theatrical operation based on the defined aesthetics of their own theatrical history and theoretical traditions.

DEDICATION

With love and appreciation

to Mom, Hely, and Patrick for obvious reasons, and to every encouraging spirit I have encountered on this journey. Many thanks for the insights, light and pure love you shared.

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"A Look at Things to Come . . .," BTNews (Vol. 6, No. 4), Summer 1996.10-12.

"Notes from the Master: A Conversation with Dr. Lloyd Richards," BTNews (Vol. 7, No. 3), Spring 1997, 8-12.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1980, Margaret Wilkerson wrote; "There is a war in progress between Blacks and whites over the nature of reality. And the battle lines are clearly drawn in theatre." This statement comes from her essay titled "Critics, Standards and Black Theatre," in which she posits that; "[white] critics are hampered by their preconceptions about theatre." She further states: "the disenchantment of Black artists with white critics is rooted in the conviction that these critics lack the cultural sensitivity to evaluate their productions."[1] One of the problems that give rise to this view is the failure by many critics to understand or acknowledge that African-Americans, owed to the condition of their creation, are unique beings in this world and that the theatre which they produce stems from a unique American theoretical tradition. This view also

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[1] Margaret B. Wilkerson, "Critics, Standards and Black Theatre," in The Theatre of Black Americans: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. with intro. by Errol Hill, NY: Applause 1987, 318.

indicates a general lack of knowledge concerning the theoretical foundation and development of fundamental elements and aspects particular to African-American theatre and drama. Many critics do not understand that an important part of African-American theatre is rooted in its slave plantation origins in the Southern United States; that African-American theatre has always had both a "public" and "private" audience; a product of what W. E. B. DuBois called "double consciousness" in reference to the multiple awareness of marginal figures existing within a culturally dominated society.[2]

Robert Stepto in From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative, adds to an understanding of discrepant views of Black-White artistic realities with his introduction of the term "strategies of authentication," that explains the need by African-American authors to fight "a usually hidden battle for the control of meaning with surrounding white authorities."[3] Stepto's term refers specifically to the various authors of slave narratives during the mid-nineteenth century in the United States, who

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[2] W. E. B. DuBois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," The Souls of Black Folk, New York: Blue Heron 1953.

[3] Robert B. Stepto, From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative, Urbana: University of Illinois 1979. Also, Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, eds., The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism, New York: Columbia UP 1995, 285.

were required to prove that their accounts of slavery were true and factual to a primarily White audience. In the contemporary cultural studies mode, Stepto's term has been extended "to refer to the various strategies, whether of plot, style, or genre, by which a minority text adjusts to the demands of the standard marketplace."[4] The term also identifies tactics and strategies by which African-American authors subvert limitations in order to (re)gain control of their own perspectives and assert their own voices. This subliminal act of defiance may be traced back to the very beginning of African-American theatre or public entertainments by Black people in the United States.

What began as a form of public "entertainment" for White slave owners is explained by Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer in Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the African-American in the Performing Arts:

> Negroes (as Africans were called by the Spaniards) have been music makers and entertainers in the New World for more than three centuries. The first stage for the captive Africans was the open deck of a slave ship. There on the way to the Americans, blacks in chains, when herded up on deck for exercise, were forced to sing and dance in the open air for the amusement of the crew. The log of the English slave ship *Hannibal* in the year 1664 recorded that the Africans linked together aboard that vessel were made to "jump and dance for an hour or two" every day . . . "If they go about it reluctantly or do not move with agility, they are flogged," states an account of

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[4] Childers and Hentzi, 285.

> the slave trade published in England in 1788. . . . The white sailors on the Middle Passage found these Africans and their rhythms highly entertaining, as did the planters ashore who purchased these black imports to work on their American plantations.[5]

Hughes and Meltzer's statement gives testament to the forced beginnings of African-American presentational art. It was an art form brought from Africa and is further explained as having major impact on American culture:

> The syncopated beat which the captive Africans brought with them - and which perhaps lightened a little the burden of their servitude - quickly took root in the New World. Now that beat has been for generations a basic part of American musical entertainment. . . . So this implantation of the basic beat in America began with the hand-clapping, feet-stomping, drum-beating rhythms (related, of course, to the rhythms of the human heart) that Africa exported to our shores in the fifteenth century.[6]

While these "public" acts provided entertainment for Whites they obviously held different meaning and purpose for the Blacks who were forced to perform them.

It should also be remembered that in the case of the "public" roots of African-American theatre appropriation of artistic originality and purpose took place, whereby a form of cultural capital was taken over and turned against its original possessors while the "private" meanings were left

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[5] Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the African-American in the Performing Arts, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967, 2 & 4. Reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1990.

[6] Hughes and Meltzer, 4-5.

unacknowledged. Consequently, creative works conceived by African-Americans may not always be best served by judgment and analysis according to criteria established by and for a cultural reality which is oppositional to the lived experiences of the creators. This is explained by Leslie Catherine Sanders as a Black-figure/ White-ground configuration, similar to the subject/ object configuration utilized in cultural studies models. While the subject/ object configuration will be a major part of the overall framing of this study, the Black-figure/ White-ground configuration needs explanation.

In the introduction to The Development of Black Theatre in America: From Shadows to Selves, Sanders discusses "the traditional relation of black characters to a white audience" as "a problem that has long hampered the development of black theater."[7] She explains:

> In a predominantly white society, the cultural ground is white. . . . In the theater, then, the stage reality, the conscious and unconscious assumptions mutually accepted by the theater and its audience, is white, unless white assumptions have been replaced by black assumptions, giving a black stage reality. Until those assumptions are replaced, black figures on stage exist in a white ground, and their color is charged with significance.[8]

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[7] Leslie Catherine Sanders, The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves, Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State UP, 1988, 1.

[8] Sanders, 2.

Sanders goes on to explain how this configuration of Black figure/ White-ground has become a standard by which American theatre audiences, which are predominantly White, have traditionally found credible only those portrayals of Black characters (and "others") which they have been prepared to believe. Consequently, images of Blacks on stage have traditionally been a way for Whites to see themselves, and have not primarily been concerned with real or true lived experiences of Black people from Black perspectives. Rather, the Black image has been used as an expression of White experience, "both as metaphor of more general aspects of the human predicament and as mask for . . . personal experience and philosophy."[9]

Sanders believes that the continuing challenge for contemporary African-American playwrights is to reverse the Black-figure/ White-ground configuration and create a Black stage reality; "to demetaphorize the figure of the black and make that of the white metaphorical."[10] This is a primary task of African-American dramatic theory; to explicate an independently derived African-American dramatic aesthetic, in order to (re)gain, (re)define and (re)institute a positive African-American stage figure and ground within a context which recognizes a different system

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[9] Sanders, 1.

[10] Sanders, 3.

of conduct and manners fueled by its own history, philosophy, mythology, creative motifs, social organization, morals and ethics; thus, to make the Black figure the subject rather than the object of distinctive stage realities and critical analyses.

A cultural studies investigation of African-American dramatic theory is warranted in order to justify a philosophical "difference" and highlight positive aspects of "otherness" inherent to African-American theatre. This study will review specific philosophies, theories and manifestos created to encourage the development, justification and understanding of theatre by, for and about peoples of African descent in the United States. There are two objectives for this study: 1. to illustrate an evolved history of African-American dramatic theory in order to suggest how such theories are a reflection of and oppositional to American cultural ideology, and 2. to demonstrate a tradition of spiritual awareness, sensibility and purpose in the history of African-American theatre development. Such a study is important to explain and encourage a present position and possibility for African-American theatre theorists and practitioners to produce and perform based on an established tradition of dramatic purpose.

A survey of present and available literature has revealed no existing study of length addressing an analysis

of critical theories of African-American theatre from a cultural studies perspective. The majority of research and analysis work in regard to African-American theatre has been focused on the chronicling of historical events and identifying notable persons and theatre institutions. Exceptions to this include Barbara and Carlton Molette's Black Theatre: Premise and Presentation, which posits an Afrocentric framework for the reading of all African-American theatre and drama and Samuel A. Hay's African American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis, an examination of African-American theatre history from a critical perspective with recommendations for the future. Neither of these studies looks specifically at the particular theoretical manifestoes for their interpretative power in relation to present time and circumstance. The particular focus of this present project is a focus on African-American dramatic theory as subject of cultural studies. The fundamental question to be addressed in this study is: "How is the development of African-American dramatic theory a reflection of the present development of African-American theatre and what role will in play in the further evolution of African-American theatre in the twenty-first century?"

Such a focus is in keeping with French researcher Geneviève Fabre, who in a 1983 publication acknowledged African-American theatrical production as a tool for

research into the identity and "symbolic expression of the black world view and experience." Fabre surmised that:

> The emergence of black theatre [in the United States] is above all a sociocultural phenomenon and must be examined as such. The term [black theatre] is taken here to mean theatrical production by blacks that serves as a tool for research into ethnic identity and the most appropriate means to express it artistically, for analysis of the situation of blacks in North America, for symbolic expression of the black world view and experience. As an ethnic theatre it is born out of historical conflict. At the heart of its beginnings is the quest for identity.[11]

Fabre highlights the sociocultural and ethnic aspect of African-American theatre and points out that African-American theatrical production may serve as analytical research tool for the understanding of an African-American "world view and experience" or Black-ground. By placing importance on the inner workings of African-American theatre and its artists she pinpoints the "quest for identity" issue which has been a reoccurring theme throughout the development and history of African-American theatre. The realm of cultural studies provides a fitting framework for such a study.

Social theorists Lawrence Grossberg, Carry Nelson and Paula A. Treichler, in their groundbreaking anthology on the subject of Cultural Studies explain:

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[11] Geneviève Fabre, Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP 1983, 1.

> cultural studies is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counter-disciplinary field that operates in the tension between its tendencies to embrace both a broad, anthropological and a more narrowly humanistic conception of culture. . . .It is typically interpretive and evaluative in its methodologies, but unlike traditional humanism it rejects the exclusive equation of culture with high culture and argues that all forms of cultural production need to be studied in relation to other cultural practices and to social and historical structures. Cultural studies is thus committed to the study of the entire range of a society's arts, beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices.[12]

This statement suggests a need to view or analyze African-American dramatic theory within the context of its own cultural ground (Black ground) in order to perceive full measure of understanding and significance of its place in the larger society. Grossberg, Nelson and Teichler use the words of one of the founding architects of cultural studies, Stuart Hall, to express one of the primary aims of the movement: "to enable people to understand what [was] going on, and especially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival, and resources for resistance."[13] However, it is theorist Tony Bennett who expresses the particular aim of cultural studies which best suits our purposes in this study: "a commitment to examining cultural

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[12] Grossberg, Lawrence, Carry Nelson and Paula A. Treichler, eds. Cultural Studies, New York: Routledge 1992, 4.

[13] Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler, 4.

practices from the point of view of their intrication with, and within, relations of power."[14]

It is the relationship between African-American dramatic theory and power which is of interest at this point in the historical development of the field. The theoretical empowerment of African-American artists is essential for the elevation of African-American theatre to the "next stage" of development. According to playwright (August) Wilson:

> The time has come for black [artists] . . . to address questions of aesthetics and ways to defend ourselves from the nay-sayers who would trumpet our talents as insufficient to warrant the same manner of investigation and exploration as the majority. We need to develop guidelines for the protection of our cultural property, our contributions and the influence they accrue.[15]

Wilson calls for the self empowerment of Black artists through new "strategies of authentication." He suggests the need for self agency, the power to speak for oneself, to control ones personal freedom of cultural expression and to control the gains and rewards that such expression might produce.

According to The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism, power is usually defined in one of two senses: 1. as the ability or skill to do

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[14] Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler, 3.

[15] Wilson, 73.

something; or 2. as the possession of the capacity to dominate or control someone or something else. It is the second sense that has received the greatest amount of critical attention and provides the crudest and probably oldest view. This view is that those who possess the greatest brute force are the most powerful.[16] But, as Max Weber pointed out, those who possess and exercise "political power" are less inclined to do so by threat of physical violence, but rather on the basis of tradition, legal systems, ideology, consensus, etc.,[17] the normal strategies of cultural hegemony. Yet, Michel Foucault reminds us that power should not be seen only as oppressive.

For Foucault, power can also be enabling when employed by groups against dominant forms of oppression.[18] Likewise, Edward Said points out in his concept of "affiliation" that when hegemony is used to clarify the dominance of oppression it may be utilized to overturn the power formation that currently exists.[19] Grossberg, Nelson

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[16] Childers and Hentzi, 238.

[17] Max Weber, Politics as a Vocation, trans. H. H. Gert and C. Wright Mills, Philadelphia: Fortess 1968.

[18] Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977, trans. and ed., Colin Gordon, New York: Pantheon 1980.

[19] Edward Said, The World, The Text, and the Critic, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP 1983.

and Treichler quote respected theorist of popular and mass culture John Fiske, who states; "cultural studies offers a bridge between theory and material culture."[20] Such a bridge is very much in keeping with another major intent of cultural studies, the production of organic intellectuals.

Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler utilize comments from Hall's explanation in "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies" to explain the special character of organic intellectuals working in cultural studies. They contend that in this particular area organic intellectuals must work on two fronts at one and the same time: 1. to be at the forefront of intellectual theoretical work (must know more than traditional intellectuals do; not just be knowledgeable but know deeply and profoundly); 2. must have responsibility to transmit those ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function, to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class.[21] Both projects must be part of contemporary cultural studies in order for engagement on the political level particularly when attempting to justify a marginal or oppositional position within the realm of traditionalist intellectual practice.

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[20] Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler, 6.

[21] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in Cultural Studies, Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler, 280.

Cultural studies as a relatively new field of study, now allows for new values to be exposed that were previously unacceptable or unacknowledged as part of intellectual discourse. The importance of political engagement to cultural studies is explained in the follow way:

> In cultural studies, the politics of the analysis and the politics of intellectual work are inseparable. Analysis depends on intellectual work; for cultural studies, theory is a crucial part of that work. Yet intellectual work is, by itself, incomplete unless it enters back into the world of cultural and political power and struggle, unless it responds to the challenges of history. Cultural studies, then, is always partly driven by the political demands of its context and the exigencies of its institutional situation; critical practice is not only determined by, it is responsible to, its situation.[22]

As a means to cultural and political empowerment for African-American artists and African-American theatre it is important that African-American dramatic theory be analyzed. It is also important that these theories and philosophies be analyzed as subject rather than object of a cultural studies endeavor. The importance of this distinctive undertaking may be clarified by looking at how the terms subject and object are utilized for cultural studies purposes.

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[22] Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler, 6.

A simple definition of subject and object explains; the subject may be seen as that which acts, speaks or represents while the object is that which is acted upon, spoken for or represented. The concept of the subject denotes human activism, agency and power. In this regard, subject refers to the thinker, actor, doer while the object is dormant none thinker, analyzed according to dominant criteria and acted upon. But the simplicity of these definitions become a bit complex when the terms take on their adjectival forms, subjective and objective, when describing certain critical perspectives. According to Childers and Hentzi:

> the implication is that subjective criticism is based upon *particular human desires, needs, or interests* (usually of the AUTHOR), while objective criticism is devoid of these impulses. When used in this sense, "subjective" almost always has pejorative connotations, since in its *indulgence of the personal* it cannot claim the same universality that "objective" criticism can.[23]

In recent years, opponents of objective criticism have attacked any notions of evaluation or critique outside the realms of constructed ideology. Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan refers to the subject as a creation of an "imaginary self."[24] Marxist theorist Louis Althusser concludes that

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[23] Childers and Hentzi, 291. Italics mine.

[24] Jacques Lacan, Ecrits: A Selection, trans., Alan Sheridan, New York: Norton, 1977.

an "individual" exists in ideology and is always already a subject.[25] Theorist Michel Pecheux argues that the subject must identify the self in terms of the discourse that predominates that individuals existence.[26] But it is theorist Michel Foucault's concern with subjectivity and its relation to the ethical concept of "self-creation" outside of universal principles that provides interesting concern for this study.[27] The need for self creation and self analysis is directly related to the conflict and complexity of the subject/ object configuration in relation to the development of American theatre in general. This can be seen by looking at the development of these associated terms in light of the particular historical development of the African-American stage figure.

The subject/object configuration has been a major problem in the development of African-American theatre. From the moment the first White minstrel artists blackened their faces and took the stage to imitate African slaves as a form of entertainment the subject/object configuration was in full combat. Complications grew when Black

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[25] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatueses," in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, trans., Ben Brewster, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

[26] Michel Pecheux, Language, Semantics, and Ideology: Stating the Obvious, trans., Harbans Nagpal, London: Macmillan, 1982.

[27] See, Michel Foucault, Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, ed., Paul Rabinow, trans., Robert Hurley, New York: New Press, 1997.

performers took the stage in blackface make-up to imitate White male immigrants who were imitating them (the Black performers). This confusing configuration, a major paradox in American culture, has continued for more than a century and now warrants particular analysis. By assigning theatre terminology to subject/ object definitions so that: subject=character/ actor/ writer; while object=plot/ role/ text, following Said's concept of affiliation such analysis might empower a larger group of previously marginalized artists than specifically Black artists.

But the focus and emphasis in this study is on giving voice and agency to the realities of an African-American theatrical identity and ideology as exemplified by an evolved history of critical thinking and writing. Analysis will reveal how such theories reflect a constant quest to realize a positive and productive means by which to influence sociocultural and political change within the larger society by demonstrating the importance of spiritual awareness, power and purpose through theatrical production and performance. Ultimately, the emphasis is on clearing a ground on which a unified collective of artists may feel free and invigorated to express the uniqueness of their "otherness."

Methodologically, this work may be viewed as a social history of ideas. As cultural studies is a bricolage field of endeavor, this study will utilize a variety of avenues

for analysis. The principal source of philosophical framing will be freely appropriated from basic elements of Cornel West's theory of cultural criticism which he calls "prophetic pragmatism." West's theory will aid in the explanation of a vision for a Post-Revolutionary African-American theatre of the twenty-first century.

According to West, prophetic pragmatism is a particularly American frame of thought which is well suited to examine postmodern issues which are particularly American. It includes and combines aspects of such theoretical philosophies as Marxism, structuralism, and poststructuralism, yet maintains a particular American view point and ideology. Prophetic pragmatism constitutes an excellent framework for this particular study because it contains elements from each era of theoretical investigation. It "refines and revises [Ralph Waldo] Emerson's concerns with power, provocation, and personality in light of [John] Dewey's stress on historical consciousness and [W. E. B.] DuBois' focus on the plight of the wretched of the earth."[28] It is a fitting coincidence that it was DuBois who initiated the theoretical move for African-American theatre during the 1920s.

Prophetic pragmatism utilizes the best of revolutionary radicalism "but refuses to be simply another

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[26] Cornel West, The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism, Madison: Wisconsin UP 1989, 212.

polemical position on the ideological spectrum."[29] Ultimately, "prophetic pragmatism calls for reinvigoration of a sane, sober, and sophisticated intellectual life in America and for regeneration of social forces empowering the disadvantaged, degraded, and dejected."[30] This is a point and purpose that motivates this investigative study. West's ideals of prophetic pragmatism will work to justify a warranted assertion of new ideological perspectives toward an affirmation of the values and virtues of African-American dramatic theory and practice.

This study does not purport to be a complete or comprehensive account of the entirety of African-American dramatic theory, nor of cultural studies and its varied and innumerable applications. Rather, this project presents a selective display which highlights major published writings addressing theoretical issues concerning African-American theatre. The hope is that this endeavor may spawn further investigations that focus on the theoretical nature of African-American theatre and aid understanding and appreciation for the particularness of this field.

The road to the achievement of such a goal begins by defining a foundation for the tradition of African-American theatre. This study is based on a premise that such a

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[29] West, 239.

[30] West, 239.

foundation may be identified by rethinking and (re)claiming American minstrelsy as a form with a distinctive African based background and purpose. This claim is made possible by a careful decoded reading of the history and development of the American minstrel tradition. While some believe that the blackface tradition of American Negro Minstrelsy is "the one purely native form of entertainment and the only distinctively American contribution to the theatre,"[31] it is neither a true nor honest image of Black Americans, nor is it a form created or structured by Black Americans. However, because minstrelsy is based on aspects of African slave behavior, it may be possible to (re)claim it as an essential African-American tradition by (re)defining it from a Black perspective; providing a Black-ground and revealing possible underlying meanings in its purpose. Therefore, this study will begin with this (re)claiming effort which asserts that African-American theatre did begin with slave practices on southern plantations. This is done in Chapter 2, which is titled: "The Roots of African-American Theatre: From Minstrelsy to Warranted Assertion."

Chapter 3 outlines and describes "The Historical Formation of African-American Dramatic Theory: Creating a 'New Negro' Image." This chapter analyzes the writings of

[31] Carl Wittke, Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage, Durham, N.C.: Duke UP 1930.

DuBois and Alain Locke as the major theorist and leaders of the New Negro Movement, or The Harlem Renaissance, toward African-American artistic credibility in the 1920s. Selected writings of others from the period are reviewed to suggest an overall purpose and platform of aesthetic principles which established the beginnings of a theoretical tradition for African-American theatre.

Chapter 4, titled "From Theory to Stage: The Developmental Years From the 1920s to 1950," demonstrates the struggle to bring a true theatre about, by, for and near Black Americans to reality. Chapter 5 explains the strained progress of African-American theatre development during the 1950s and early 1960s, creating a need for the radical explosion of activism that resulted in the politically charged Revolutionary Black Theatre. This chapter is titled "The Evolution into a Revolutionary Theatre: Black Theatre and the Black Arts Movement." The chapter examines aesthetic theories that aided racial awareness and the cultural and ideological transformation from a Negroes to a Black people. The major writings of LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Larry Neal, Ed Bullins, Ron Milner and the radical proactive principles of the 1960s and early 1970s constitute the focus of this chapter.

Chapter 6 investigates outgrowths of the Revolutionary era and highlights the development of contemporary thought. The content begins with the Afrocentric and rituralistic

concepts of the African continuum and advances to substantiate its title, "A New Age of Possibilities: Justifying Post-Revolutionary African-American Theatre Aesthetics." This chapter looks at African-American postmodern theatrical sensibilities and explains a circular, or spiral, return to a focus on spiritual awareness and purpose in African-American theatre. The writings of selected dramatists of the present are reviewed as they attempt to define an independent African-American dramatic aesthetic for the twenty-first century and beyond.

Chapter 7 concludes the study with examination of two 1998 National Black Theatre Summit events and speculation on meanings and potentials revealed by a mapping of an historical tradition of African-American dramatic theory.

Throughout the study the terms Negro, Black and African-American will be used to identify people of African descent making a home in the United States. The progressional usage of these terms will also indicate the developmental quest for racial and group identity and the constant need to (re)construct an African-American ideological persona as represented by the change in terms.

CHAPTER 2

THE ROOTS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN THEATRE: FROM MINSTRELSY TO WARRANTED ASSERTION

This study is based on a premise that the founding tradition for an African-American theatre may be identified by a careful decoded reading of the history and development of the American minstrel tradition. While some believe that the blackface performance tradition of what was then called American "Negro" minstrelsy is "the one purely native form of entertainment and the only distinctively American contribution to the theatre,"[32] it is neither a true nor honest image of African-Americans, nor is it a form created or structured by African-Americans. However, because minstrelsy is based on aspects of Black slave behavior, an act of cultural appropriation, it may be possible to (re)claim it as an essential African-American

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[32] Wittke, ibid.

tradition by (re)defining it from an African-American perspective; providing a Black-ground and revealing the underlying meanings in its creation. Therefore, this study begins by (re)appropriating this "stolen" African-American ritualistic tradition in order to show its function as the founding need for "erasure"[33] or purposeful theoretical development with specific intent to dispel the negative construction of Negro/ Black/ African-American image and character.

A recapitulation of the origins and development of American minstrelsy will provide reason for a warranted assertion of combative theoretical practice and principles established during the years that followed the fall of the minstrel tradition. That founding era for African-American dramatic theory, known as the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance, will be discussed in the next chapter.

The minstrel show, as promulgated throughout history, was a White male creation; a parody and burlesque of African slaves, and later, free Black Americans. It was a structure in which White males painted themselves black

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[33] Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans., Gayari Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1976. Derrida refers to placing a term or concept, (in this case 'White immigrant male minstrelsy') "under erasure" by marking it through typographically with a large black X. In this way he is calling attention to the absence of univocal meaning, truth, or origin. Here the term is used to signify a reappropriating act of recovering unmitigated meanings and functions of the minstrel rituals as originally performed by African slaves

with burnt cork, broadened their lips with white or red paint, donned themselves in ridiculous outfits and created a stage voice and persona of African-Americans "based on no linguistic system besides the language of racism."[34] By tracing the development of the American minstrel tradition and its social implications it may be possible to see this point more clearly.

The origins of minstrelsy can be traced to the earliest recorded events presenting images of the African-American on-stage. These images were doubly negative from the start. In 1769 Lewis Hallam played the role of a Black slave in the New York production of The Padlock by Isaac Bickerstaff. When Hallam, in blackface, went on stage in a highly inebriated state, he was not seen as a drunken unprofessional. He was laughingly appreciated by an all White audience, and he set a foundation and pattern for White expectations of Black characters on the American stage.[35] This fact illustrates and supports a theory presented by Leslie Catherine Sanders; the configuration of Black-figure on White-ground.

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[34] Ntozake Shange, "unrecoverd loses: black theater traditions" in Three Pieces: Spell #7/ A Photograph: Lovers in Motion/ Boogie Woogie Landscapes, Harrisonburg, Va: R. R. Donnelley and Sons 1981, xii.

[35] Gary D. Engle, "Introduction: American Minstrelsy and Democratic Art" in This Grotesque Essence, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP 1978, xv-xvi.

Sanders noted that White audiences have "traditionally found credible only those portrayals of Black characters which they have been prepared to believe," and that the primary traditional function of the stage persona of Blacks has been "a way for Whites to see themselves, and have not primarily been concerned with truthful lived experiences of Black people from Black perspectives."[36] Hallam's initial presentation serendipitously gives validity to Sanders's assertion, for further historical reports describe the development of this trend in the years that followed.

Carl Wittke reports that as the nineteenth century emerged on American stages, an actor named Gottlieb Graupner sang "The Negro Boy" in blackface make-up in a 1799 production of the play Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave at the Federal Theatre in Boston to notable audience approval.[37] Wittke further states: "For a considerable period in the early nineteenth century Negro clowns were extremely popular, and hardly a circus was complete without a blackface performer."[38] There is knowledge of many names yet little record of several other blackface performers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[39] All

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[36] See, Leslie Catherine Sanders, The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves, Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State UP 1988.

[37] Wittke, 10.

[38] Wittke, 12.

were actors who became specialty performers or lowly clown figures noted for their abilities at playing Negro characters. The most famous of this group is Thomas Dartmouth Rice, who achieved wide acclaim and become known as minstrelsy's first and greatest legitimate star.

Rice's rise began when he imitated a crippled Black man in a musical rendition of "Jump Jim Crow" sometime between 1828 and 1831.[40] Gary Engle tells us that this happened "somewhere in the Ohio River Valley - some historians say Cincinnati, some Louisville, others Pittsburgh."[41] This act earned Rice fame in the United States and England and the titles, "Daddy" Rice and "father of American Minstrelsy."[42] He is credited with creating what would later become the core of minstrel show performances when he began performing what he called "Ethiopian operas" in New York during the early 1830s. These performances used more than one performer and utilized elements of song, dance and slapstick antics spun around plots of childish simplicity and played as finales at variety shows.[43] Rice's popularity and financial success spawned many blackface imitators of his style,

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[39] Wittke, 16-19.

[40] Various sources differ on the exactness of this date.

[41] Engle, xvi.

[42] Wittke, 16-19.

[43] Engle, xvii.

including among them Miss Wray (a female child known in 1835 as the seven-year-old "young American phenomenon" performing in a Richmond-Hill circus).[44] These early White performer's impersonations of Southern plantation Blacks may have been clever and entertaining. At the same time, they established an image of real Black Americans as buffoons, clowns, and "joke book" caricatures.

Most of the early minstrel performers who impersonated Blacks had never actually met a Black person. Wittke explains:

> Many of the famous minstrel men were Northern-born-and-reared, or foreign-born immigrant white men, who had almost no first-hand knowledge of the Negro's manner of life. The subjects and ideas of many minstrel shows,. . .were Caucasian, and not Negro. Moreover, most of the great minstrel songs of the decade when minstrelsy was the leading form of theatrical entertainment, were written by white men, and only some of the earlier of these "Negro" songs had any original Negro basis. Many showed closer relationship to other songs current in the 1810's and 1820's sung by early non-Negro "songsters," than to Negro folk music. The earlier minstrel melodies quickly established a conventional "Negro" song, which other minstrel composers were quick to imitate.[45]

Wittke helps us to see that while the images and ideas for minstrelsy were clearly based on Black Americans, the institution consisted primarily of "the thoughts, history, and artistic creations of white people."[46] This act of

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[44] Wittke, 33-34.

[45] Wittke, 39-40.

appropriation, reappropriation and misappropration helped to establish the Black-figure as an objectified commoditiy of a capitalist American theatre philosophical hegemony.

In 1843 Daniel Decatur Emmett formed and presented the first show completely monopolized by blackface characters and performances. The company was named the Virginia Minstrels and all of its members had been individual blackface performers with theatrical or circus experience where they had earned notoriety for various Negro characterizations and musical specialties.[47] The arrangement of these various specialties was given a recognizable and repeatable structure by E. Byron Christy and his Christy Minstrels in 1846. The Virginia and Christy Minstrels were imitated by several other groups in the years that closely followed. There were hundreds of groups, each named for states of origin, managers who organized them or leading performers.[48]

A minstrel parade, said to be derived from the close relationship of the minstrel show to the circus, became an established part of the tradition. According to Wittke:

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[46] Sanders, 1.

[47] Wittke, 39.

[48] A long list of minstrel companies is indexed and discussed by Wittke. Others are also indexed and discussed in, Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch and Brooks McNamara, eds., Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy, Hanover and London: Wesleyan UP, 1996.

> Mexican drum majors, pickanniny drum corps, and silken banners, great capes and gold-headed canes frequently were special features of these parades. In 1896, D. W. McCade's Young Operatic Minstrels staged "a Turkish bath parade," with four lady buglers on horseback, twelve dancing musketeers, six drum majors, two drummers, an eighteen piece band, and various animals. While the origin of this feature of minstrelsy is sometimes accredited to Ordway's Minstrels and the Christy Company, in about the year 1850, Al G. Field claimed to have been the first manager to uniform the minstrels in the parade in long, light-colored, newmarket [sic] overcoats with black velvet collars, in contrast with the red broadcloth, trimmed uniforms worn by the band. In a number of seasons, Field had Shetland ponies and Arabian horses in his minstrel parades.[49]

Like the circus parade, the minstrel parade was used as a marketing device to signal the arrival of a troupe in town or the opening of a new show in locations were there was a permanent company. The parades would often end in front of the theatre where a performance was to take place and a brief "free" preview of a few songs or acts would be performed to induce ticket sales for the full show that was to follow.

In addition to parades, another device of the all male institution of American minstrelsy was the unique presence of the female impersonator. This practice had become an important part of the minstrel tradition by the 1850s. In fact, Laurence Senelick reports that the term female impersonator was actually coined, possibly for this very

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[49] Wittke, 146-147.

purpose.[50] These impersonated female characters were almost always presented as exotic and erotic mulatta or fair skinned mixed blood figures. They were also referred to a "wench" characters who were presented as exotic sexual objects. They were often identified and associated with special minstrel songs. Annemarie Bean explains:

> the Southern mulatta coquette became the "lyric and theatrical object of the song" and the entire theatre arena in the early minstrel show. Indeed, early minstrelsy was founded in songs that combined both the erotic and the commodification of the sexual being of the characters, usually involving a mulatta wench and two darker skinned men rivaling for her attention, named the "dark triangle" in one minstrelsy book.[51]

By the mid-1850s the mulatta "wench" was as integral as the end men or interlocutor characters to the overall makeup of the minstrel show format.

By the 1860s the wench had risen to the new designation of "the prima donna" figure and was often played by the featured tenor singer. Many of these prima donna figures became bigger stars than the companies with

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[50] Laurence Senelick, "The Evolution of the Male Impersonator on the Nineteenth-Century Popular Stage" in Essays in Theatre 1:1, 1982, 32.

[51] Annemarie Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy," in, Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch and Brooks McNamara, eds., Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy, Hanover and London: Wesleyan UP 1996, 247. The mintrelsy book referred to at the end of Bean's passage is; Dailey Paskman and Sigmund Spaeth, "Gentlemen, Be Seated!": A Parade of the Old-Time Minstrels, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran 1928.

which they were associated. Robert Toll reports that prima donnas were often interviewed for newspapers and reports of their spectacular wardrobes were discussed.[52]

A substantial accounting of the female impersonator in the minstrel tradition has been researched and recorded and there is a long list of minstrel performers who became famous for this peculiar act of double appropriation.[53] While the exotic and erotic wench and prima donna was a major figure for many companies of minstrels, another low comic female impersonated character was one of darker complexion and called the "Funny Old Gal." These female characters, in addition to well established representations of Negro males, were additional means by which the entire Negro race became commodified, objectified, ridiculed, and reduced to the lowest strata of acknowledgment within American societal structure.

In the period between the 1840s and the 1870s "minstrelsy was the dominant form of American popular art" with "more than a hundred professional troupes in

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[52] Robert C. Toll, Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America, New York: Oxford University Press 1974, 144.

[53] Prima donnas are named and explained by several sources including: Bean; Paskman and Spaeth; Senelick; Toll; Lawrence Hutton, Curiosities of the American Stage, New York: Harper & Row 1891; Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class, New York: Oxford UP 1993; and Edward LeRoy Rice, Monarchs of Minstrelsy from "Daddy" Rice to Date, New York: Kenny 1911.

blackface."[54] The majority of these groups performed mostly in the Northeast regions of the United States. Engle reports:

> New York alone boasted ten resident companies by 1860, and professional troupes held forth at various times in Boston, Hartford, Washington, Richmond, Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, New Orleans, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland, Chicago, St. Paul, and San Francisco.[55]

Other groups would travel throughout all parts of the United States entertaining "every class in American society" including "a long lasting love affair between America's presidents and its most popular entertainment form,"[56] the minstrel show.

As established by Christy, the minstrel show included two main parts. Part One was comprised of a series of songs, jokes and dances. Performers in blackface make-up were seated in a semi-circle on stage with the interlocutor, or straight man, at the center. At each end of the semi-circular line were two "end men" with the appropriate titles of Tambo and Bones. The end men were named for the instruments that they played, the tambourine and the bones (cleaned animal bones dried and bleached in the sun and used as castanets). These instruments along

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[54] Engle, xix.

[55] Engle, ixx-xx.

[56] Engle, ixx-xx.

with the fiddle and banjo, also major musical requirements of the minstrel band, were recreations of African instruments reconfigured in America by Black slaves. According to Engle: "These end men were the essential minstrel clowns on the Jim Crow model whose rudimentary wit and childish antics constantly deflated the formal presentations of the interlocutor,"[57] who was the only minstrel character representative of Whites and the only minstrel character not required to wear blackface.

It may be speculated that the interlocutor character was derived from plantation slave performances in which a house servant, most acquainted with the manners of the master, would impersonate the White plantation owner or overseer. It may also be argued that this character was a follow up to the circus ringmaster with whom blackface minstrel characters were earlier associated.[58] At any rate, the interlocutor was reportedly always played by a large figure of a man with a big booming voice, indicating visual command of the lesser dark figures.

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[57] Engle, xviii.

[58] Speculation concerning the origins of the minstrel interlocutor are based on information from Wittke, Engle, Toll, Sanders and Bean. Sanders and Bean both provide evidence that during slave performances on the plantations the straight man or interlocutor figure was played by the house servant. The association of Negro clown character to the circus has already been provided. Engle and Toll both concur on the speculation of the ringmaster as a potential source of the interlocutor figure.

The second part of the minstrel show, called The Olio, offered a variety of specialty acts, comic skits, and monologues which came to be known as stump speeches. According to Engle, the stump speech had a basic intention of "lampooning the developing American folk art of spread-eagle oratory,"[59] made popular in political speeches and lectures. While such speeches served as marks of intellect and political prowess in White society, the stump speech in the minstrel tradition served to burlesque African-American thought and speech. The minstrel stump speech was usually characterized by a well dressed or "overdressed" Northern Negro character who could not clearly articulate his thoughts and had no clear understanding of the highbrow words and concepts which he attempted to use.

As minstrelsy grew in popularity a third part developed in the structure of its form. This was The Afterpiece, in which the entire company performed a short farce, Shakespearean burlesque, political lampoon, or a comic parody of a contemporary fad or high cultural event. The Afterpiece was performed with full costumes and sets and performed in an exaggerated style to rival that of melodramatic actors. Within a short time, however, The Afterpiece became entwined with The Olio with the prima donna figure developing as star of this section. But the

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[59] Engle, xviii.

structure and elements that combined to produce America's most first original and most entertaining theatrical form was socially complex and one of the most amazingly paradoxical phenomenas in history.

American blackface minstrelsy is a unique paradox for several reasons. First, Wittke explains:

> The source of Negro minstrelsy is to be found in the soil of the Southland. . . . The burnt cork artist of the United States of the nineteenth century could have originated in no other country in the world. His art was indigenous to the United States, and from here it was introduced, with only moderate success, to England, the Continent of Europe, and to other parts of the globe. If it did not flourish elsewhere as it did in the United States, the primary reason was that foreigners could not understand or fully appreciate the peculiarly American conditions from which this entirely new form of entertainment had sprung.[60]

The peculiar American conditions of which Wittke spoke have to do with the conditions inherent to slavery in the United States. England and other countries of Europe could not relate to minstrelsy in the same way as Americans because they could not understand the level of sociological opposition and polarity created by the conditions of African servitude in the United Stages. It is a paradox that the part of the American population on the lowest spectrum of the society's cultural strata should produce the most popular entertainment form of that culture. Yet,

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[60] Wittke, 5. See also, Brander Matthews, "The Rise and Fall of Negro Minstrelsy" in Scribner's Magazine, LVII, n.d., 754-759.

if one remembers that this entertainment form as presented on American stages of the times was not created by Black slaves but that slaves simply served as the stimulus for what was produced this might better be understood. Still, it is a sad commentary on the nature of those on the upper levels of the social order should exhibit such a lack of regard for human suffering or show such disrespect for cultural property of others that they could derive pleasure and financial gain from the exploitation of the lesser group. But now one may also begin to understand the inherent anger, distrust and need to continually address a "supremacy of spirit" and an alternative consciousness in African-American artistic endeavors that would prevail for years to come and ultimately add to a sense of combativeness of aesthetic philosophy.

Deeper analysis of the appropriated act which produced the American minstrel tradition will show that it was also an attempt to steal the spirit of the Negro race in order to combat feelings of ethical nihilism in America's growing immigrant population. Wittke reminds us that many of the popular melodies used in minstrel shows were European folk music. It was music familiar to immigrant audiences. By changing the lyrics to associate the melody with plantation slave life, immigrants were provided a type of sentimental and sympathetic bond with minstrelsy's caricaturish images

to offset total rejection of Blacks as acceptable entertainment figures.

The paradox continues when one realizes that the music and dance which became the basis of the minstrel art form sprang from a people attempting to release the pain and agony of being bound by servitude and systematic oppression. It is an additional paradox that laughter and enjoyment can be derived for one part of a society based on the suffering of another part of that same society. Toll offers a perceptive explanation of the historical and social relevance of minstrelsy as the United States' first professional popular culture medium.

Toll contends that after the War of 1812, many Americans expressed the need for native forms, symbols, and institutions that would assert the nation's cultural distinctiveness as clearly and emphatically as the war had reaffirmed its political independence. The minstrel show was the most important new form to grow out of this process.[61] As it became a national institution minstrelsy instilled and embedded encoded images and symbols into the structure and assumptions of American popular thought. These images and symbols became a type of national folklore or mythology, providing a standard of recognition for White Americans to share. It also provided a measure of comfort

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[61] Toll, 3.

for the mostly European immigrants who were trying desperately to assimilate into American culture. Toll explains:

> Minstrels helped audiences cope with their concerns, frustrations, and anxieties. . . . They created ludicrous Northern Negro characters that assured audience members that however confused, bewildered or helpless they felt, someone was much worse off than they were . . . minstrelsy's ethnic caricatures made America's first "foreign" immigrants seem understandable. Their caustic jokes about such topics as women's rights or the problems of urban living made threatening matters seem less ominous by letting people laugh at them. Their maudlin, sentimental songs reaffirmed traditional values while also providing emotional release.[62]

In the above passage, Toll highlights aims of the minstrel mythology for White society. What remains unseen in his remarks are the ramifications of this constructed mythology of Black Americans on whose image this folklore is based.

Perhaps the greatest negative of the social and psychological functions of minstrelsy as a popular culture institution was its way of encoding into White society the notion of the supremacy of the status of Whites in America and the rationalization of racial caste "as a benevolent fulfillment of, not a contradiction to, the American Creed."[63] Minstrelsy served to convince Whites that if Negroes were to share in America's bounty of happiness, they needed Whites to take care of them. In order to

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[62] Toll, 271-272.

[63] Toll, 272.

affirm this idea, "minstrels created and repeatedly portrayed the contrasting caricatures of inept, ludicrous Northern blacks and contented, fulfilled Southern Negroes."[64] The romanticized plantation settings that became standard for minstrel shows and afterpieces provided "living" proof that Whites need not feel guilty about racial caste. Images of a simpler, happier time when society was properly ordered and the loving bonds of home and family were completely secure have continued to be exploited in political contexts as a means of appeasing one segment of the society while denigrating and humiliating another.

Cultural studies theorist John Fiske, labels elements of this device "Axis of Division," whereby the dominant social class attempts to "naturalize" meanings that serve their interests into the "common sense" of the larger society.[65] Fiske's concept aids in understanding minstrelsy's function as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA),[66] working to establish racial caste as a social norm. The concepts of "Axis of Division" and the ISA are elements of the larger philosophy of cultural hegemony,

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[64] Toll, 272.

[65] See, John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television," in Channels of Discourse, ed., R. C. Allen.

[66] See, Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, New York: Monthly Review Press 1971.

which in this case is in direct relation to Sanders' concept of White-ground. The reversal of the White-ground is a social struggle which carries forth a need to redress the minstrel stage and form, converting it to a Black-ground. Then the myth of minstrelsy as the one original and indigenous American dramatic form and the basis of African-American dramatic tradition may be reexamined for the reappropriating act of (re)definition and reclamation.

Edith Isaacs supports the theory that minstrelsy was the United States' first original major dramatic form. She attempts to credit African-Americans with the creation of this indigenous art by stating that minstrel shows were, "born out of plantation playtimes around the Negro cabins."[67] She attempts to clarify her point by explaining:

> To perceive the significance of the Negro in American theatre, it is well to remember that a native art grows only on native roots. . . . We [Americans] continue to build on a base with little folk foundation, and almost no peasant drama of the kind from which a "cultural" theatre would normally grow. And that is the main reason why, in music and dance, in rhythm and comedy and pantomime, we [Americans] borrow so freely from the Negro theatre which has developed from the earth up.[68]

While there is insight and truth in Isaacs' comments, and her intentions are righteous within the context of the time

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[67] Edith J. R. Isaacs, The Negro in the Theatre, New York: Theatre Arts Incorporated 1947, 19.

[66] Isaacs, 14-15

of her writing, her compliment to the African-American race is problematic. It is also symbolic of the inherent difficulties of attempts by Whites to explain positive impulses while utilizing language which must be connoted and decoded in different ways by African-Americans. Analysis of these well intended comments will explain this.

Isaacs identifies African-Americans as a peasant culture. This comment is justifiable when one considers the European tradition of acknowledging "peasant" and "folk" traditions as sources for development and reinvigoration of national cultures. On the other hand, given the historical degradation and exploitation of what could have been considered "Negro folk art" before the negative reading of this concept in the development of minstrelsy, Isaacs' well intended comments serve to reaffirms a negative notion that all Blacks can sing, dance and are essentially comic figures. At the same time, Isaacs paradoxically provides an ironic basis of support for a contention set forth by Eleanor W. Traylor that "the source of all that can be called representative American theatre is Aframerican;"[69] giving added meaning to the paradox of the minstrel tradition and added support to the establishment of a Black-ground for minstrelsy as an

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[69] Eleanor W. Traylor, "Two Afro-American Contributions to Dramatic Form" in The Theater of Black Americans: Vol. I, ed., Errol Hill, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall 1980, 47. Traylor borrows the term *Aframerican* from James Weldon Johnson.

African-American dramatic tradition. But in order for minstrelsy to be claimed as an African-American based tradition it must be viewed and understood within the context of African-American thought which is a different perspective than that of Isaacs and others.

Toll has explained the construction of a national mythology created around the development of the minstrel show. By (re)interpreting this mythological construct from an alternate point of view a new interpretation and understanding of the original intentions behind the the slave actions on which the minstrel mythology was based may be seen. Traylor suggests that it is even possible to claim the foundation of indiginous American theatre as being rooted in African-American culture. She explains the possiblility for this (re)construction process in the following way:

> Once a mythology is formed, a *temenos* or magic circle is drawn around a culture, and literature develops historically within a limited orbit of language, reference, allusion, beliefs, transmitted and shared tradition. . . . When one probes the Afro-American "*temenos* or magic circle" of creation, one discovers certain essential ingredients of a distinct shaping-process. That process does not seem to yield the same structures of tragedy, comedy, realism, expressionism, surrealism, or absurdity as those modes are understood within the European context. The process which nourished the first American dramatic form (the minstrel show) created the Blues and offers the continuing vocabulary of new world dance. It arises from "a tradition of confrontation and improvisation," of "grace under pressure." That process, which was forged in America by African

> peoples, offers modes or forms transcendent of those which it adapts and improvises.[70]

Traylor's point is that the mythology of minstrelsy created by Whites provided a negative historical perspective of African-American traditions. Her contention is based on the notion that Black slaves were misunderstood by Whites who could not see the complex layerings of Black encoded meanings behind the masked acts of slave music, mime and dance or the independently created "pidgin" language that they spoke.[71] This becomes clearer when one considers that the well intended Isaacs, a White woman, does not acknowledge or seem to understand the paradox or potential negative implication of confusing slave "play" with slave rituals.

Traylor, an African-American, reminds us that "the masking-miming rituals created by enslaved Africans on American soil was 'something entirely different and new' to the American ethos."[72] She explains more of the paradox of

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[70] Traylor, 47-48. Here Traylor quotes Northrop Frye, in "The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism", Deadalus (Spring, 1970) 268-342. Also, Albert Murray, The Omni-Americans, New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfey 1970, 18. Also, Murray, Stomping the Blues, New York: McGraw-Hill 1976, 63.

[71] Pidgin English is also known as Gullah, "Geechee," or Plantation Creole. It provided a medium of communication for African slaves and their American supervisors. Pidgin was a language native to neither group, but is a combination of African, English, French and Spanish languages. For clearer definition of Pidgin and Gullah languages see, Lee Pederson, "Language, Culture, and the Americn Heritage: Contributions From the African Languages," in The American Heritage Dictionary: 2nd College Ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1985, 27-28.

minstrelsy by suggesting further, "What white performers spied down-field, up-field, or around the slave cabins was a masking performance. They 'borrowed' the masking feature but not the signification of the mask."[73] Early White minstrels, who Traylor refers to as voyeurs, did not realize that the songs and dances of the plantation were guises by which Black slaves hid their true feelings from masters who required, often under the threat of punishment or death, images of contented happy chattel.

On another level, plantation music and dance provided slaves a sanctioned outlet for the release of oppressive stresses, angers, fears, frustrations and anxieties. On yet a deeper level, the "acts" of joy were also imitations of the White masters which provided another degree of emotional release in the revenging act of parodying what the slaves considered a lack of inherent spiritual vision and compassion of the White race. The sacred nature of these masking rituals will need deeper explanation.

The spiritual connection of the African soul was an important element overlooked by the voyeurs. Here, the spiritual significance and power of masks and masking in an African context, both literal and figurative, is revealed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.:

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[72] Traylor, 52.

[73] Traylor, 51.

> Of all the artifacts out of Africa, it is the mask which most compels. . . . Obatala, the Yoruba sculptural God, is not the artist of Apollonian illusion; he is the artist of inner essence. The Yoruban mask remains only a piece of carved wood without iwa, or character . . . without the artist who bears it before his choral audience. In all African art, the audience is chorus, and the mask is wood until it becomes mask-in-motion. The Western concept of "mask" is meaningless . . . to the Yoruba. Precisely because "the doll in wood" cannot itself signify. Once [in motion], the mask is vehicle for the primary evocation of a complete hermetic universe . . . a world autonomous, one marked both by a demonstrably interior cohesion, as well as by a complete neutrality to exterior mores and norms. The mask with its immobilized features all the while mobile, itself is a metaphor for dialectic - say rather, itself contains the mediation of opposing motion.[74]

What Gates describes in the above statement, is the sacred nature of all artistry in the African context. In this particular case he explains that the mask or masking device also acts as a protective shielding mechanism. It acts as both a mirror and a fence at the same time, reflecting a "public" image, or what one wishes to see on the outside, while protecting what is "private" and personal on the inside. The mask is empowered with truth or life only when it receives that power from the wearer. Otherwise it is wooden and inanimate, untrue, unreal, and lifeless.

This act of empowerment also relys on the participation of the audience or chorus in the practice of

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[74] Traylor, 48-49. Here Traylor quotes Henry Louis Gates, in "Dis and Dat: Dialect and the Descent," an unpublished paper read at the MLA Summer Seminar on Afro-American Literature, "From Critical Approach to Course Design," Yale University, 8 June 1977.

"call and response." This collective act is significant as an element of the African ritualistic and ceremonial practice of divination or the production of knowledge from metaphysical or supernatural sources. Philip Peek, in African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing, explains that the audience or chorus of community members has ultimate power in this ritual because they either acknowledge and accept the truth of the diviner or wearer of the mask or they reject the wearer as fraudulent.[75]

Traylor helps make the connection of the masking device to slave song and dance. The voyeurs put on the smiling mask in the form of blackface and the broad painted smile. But the burnt cork make-up became figuratively hard and wooden as it became more institutionalized in the development of the White minstrel tradition. It was through the filling of this inanimate, wooden device with falseness, lies, and mockery that Whites unknowingly committed racial and spiritual sacrilege. Traylor reminds that: "The voyeurs observed a theatrical form which, in essence, was choral and improvisational. Many sacred and secular Afro-American forms contained the choric improvisational call-and-response motifs."[76] This was true

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[75] See, Philip M. Peek, ed., African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.

[76] Traylor, 51.

of African derived slave music in the forms of both song and dance.

Historian Eileen Southern explains more about the African connection and continuum of music and dance rituals and expressive art forms:

> Numerous sources of the eighteenth century report upon the musical activities of the enslaved Africans in the colonies, singling out for special mention that the black folk sang songs in their native African languages and danced to the accompaniment of home-made instruments that resembled the traditional African instruments. In the northern colonies, the celebration of Pinkster holidays (the week following Pentecost Sunday) was turned over almost entirely to the blacks, slave and free, who revived African festivals as they had performed them in the countries of West Africa, the ancestral lands of most black Americans.[77]

In addition to these comments about the early 1800s, there is illustrative evidence; paintings such as "The Old Plantation" by an unknown artist and dated in the 1790s, showing a stick dance done to a drum and a banjo type stringed instrument.[78] In this painting a dancer appears to be jumping a stick, an action which might be speculated as a contest or a remembered ritual of some African derivation. If it is indeed a contest or ritual act, its meaning and purpose could be either simple or complex, for, since slaves were not allowed to record or speak openly

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[77] Eileen Southern, "An Origin for the Negro Spiritual," in "The Theater of Black Americans: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed., Errol Hill, New York: Applause Books 1987, 91.

[78] Hughes and Meltzer, 12.

about past life experience before the middle passage much information about such things has been lost with time and circumstance.

Another illustration, also in Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer's Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the African-American in the Performing Arts, shows what appears to be a "private" slave event. The caption for the illustration reads:

> Dancing was one of the slaves' favorite pastimes, enjoyed on special holidays and Saturday nights. One observer described the jogs and shuffles as "dancing all over," every part of the body moving at the same time.[79]

However, if one reads this illustration from an African philosophical perspective, one sees a very different picture. In fact, it appears to be a very sacred ritual.

In the illustration a cloth is laid in the middle of the floor with candles at each corner. A bowl is filled with some type of grain or roots and it sits in the center of the cloth. A female figure, looking much like a priestess is sitting against a wall on a slightly raised platform at the right of the picture. Three male figures are moving, maybe a form of dance, around the cloth with candles and bowl on the floor. They look to be in somewhat of a trance like ritualistic state. What is described as "jogs and shuffles" and "dancing all over . . . every part

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[79] Hughes and Meltzer, 13.

of the body moving at the same time," sounds to this writer more like the African-American religious ritual of the "shout" or the African derived tradition of "spirit possession" than the secular act of "pastime" dancing. A group of women are at the left of the room. Musicians are kneeling and playing drums and a string instrument against a back wall. Everyone's mouth is open in song, except for the priestess figure on her throne like chair. No one in the illustration is laughing or smiling. It is a very serious event pictured here, much akin to what we now know of African based religious rituals or Caribbean "voodoo"[80] rites and ceremonies.

Just above this illustration, on the same page, is a picture of slave in lively dance titled "The Breakdown." A male and female slave couple are dancing surrounded by a group of smiling slaves who appear to be "happy." The caption reads: "*An illustrator for* Harper's Weekly *drew this scene in 1861. A 'thumping ecstasy,' one visitor called such dances.*[sic]"[81] It is difficult to know for certain what the true stories behind these illustrations were, but there are two different images being presented; one "public" and the other "private." What is certain, is

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[80] A religion practiced chiefly in Caribbean countries, especially Haiti, syncretized from Roman Catholic ritual elements and the animism and magic of Dahomean slaves. Also referred to as vodoun and hoodoo.

[81] Hughes and Meltzer, 13.

the fact that the paintings and illustrations, like the "entertaining acts" of plantation slaves, can be decoded in different ways depending on the observer's hermeneutic proclivities or intentions. It is also an interesting note that only "The Breakdown" is dated during the time when the minstrel show was at a high period of popularity. The particular significance here is that it the picture, drawn for the White publication Harper's Weekly, was obviously designed for a White audience and meets the expected or "standard" requirements for the presentation of slave images.

The signs and signals encoded within original slave performances were obviously read with particular vision and intent by nineteenth century White immigrants and theatrical producers. Yet, there was certainly the possibility of an oppositional reading; that of the slaves themselves. From a cultural studies point of view the term by French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, *différance*,[82] might also play a role in a deconstructive reading of these

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[82] See, Jacques Derida, Writing and Difference, trans., Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago UP, 1978. Also, Of Grammatology, trans., Gayatri Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976. According to Derrida, *différance* is 'neither a word nor a concept' but a playful invention meant to refer to a number of related terms crucial to his deconstructive anti-epistemology, including *différer*, which is to differ, and the usual sense of *différance* in French, which is to postpone or delay (defer), as well as the notion of difference itself. For Derrida, the term simultaneously plays off both possible meanings of the word and is irreducible to either one or the other at any time. See also, Childers and Hentzi, 83.

historical acts. From an African and African-American point of view the term *trickster*[83] might play the same sort of role, yet in a different way; illustrating the "double-voiced" meaning, creative "double consciousness," invention and development of improvisational skills that slaves in the United States were forced to adapt. It can be speculated that any "public" displays by slaves had to be a modification of their natural artistic expressiveness and instinctual impulses. Such a necessary survival strategy might also be akin to the cultural studies concept of *simulacrum* or "the false copy, which stands in contrast to the essence or Idea."[84]

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[83] See, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism, New York: Oxford UP, 1988. The trickster has been traced back to Yoruba mythology and the God of the Crossroads, Eshu Elegbara. Eshu wears a cap that is black on one side and white on the other to remind those making a decision to consider a situation from all sides. Gates sees Eshu as the figure for interpretation - the need to see all possible meanings inherent in a text at a "verbal crossroads.

[84] Childers and Hentzi, 279-280, explain: "In the philosophy of Plato, *simulacrum* is the name given to the false copy, which stands in contrast to the essence or Idea; it is a debased reflection, understood as inferior to the pristine abstraction from which it is derived. Reacting against the Platonic tradition, along with the whole of Western metaphysics, recent theorists have rejected the distinction between appearance and essence, and given new attention to the simulacrum as a key feature of contemporary life." Jean Baudrillard in "The Precession of Simulacra," in Brian Wallis, ed., Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation, Boston: Godine, 1984, has made the concept of the simulacrum central to his analysis of postmodern consumer society, with its endless networks of media and advertising images that, according to Baudrillard, precede any reality to which they might be said to refer. French Philosopher Gilles Deleuze in The Logic of Sense, trans., Mark Lester, New York: Columbia UP, 1990, has expanded on Nietzsche's description of the philosophy of the future as the "overthrow of Platonism" by demonstrating how the simulacrum puts unto question the very concept of a true copy.

When Whites blasphemed the sacredness of Black masking and miming rituals they helped to destroy part of the Black performer's connection to the inherent spiritual nature and purpose of what was to become the United States' first indigenous and original cultural art form. The first African-Americans to take to the stage after the Civil War and Emancipation were forced to adapt to a self denigrating form of expression. Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer explain:

> It was a quarter of a century after the birth of professional minstrelsy before a Negro aggregation came into being. This was Lew Johnson's Plantation Minstrel Company. Although many of this troupe's members were quite dark - being Negro - they nevertheless followed the custom of the white minstrel troupes and blackened their faces and circled their lips with red or white to make their mouths twice normal size. But, as a large group of Negroes performing for the first time on the American stage, they brought with them their indigenous qualities and the genuine basic beat. They revealed new dances, songs and comedy routines that the whites had not yet appropriated.[85]

Even though Black performers were able to imbue their minstrel performances with a kind of authentic life and vigor, they were in actuality not performing true images of themselves, but a concept of a constructed cultural object and cultural commodity. The deeper paradox is that Black performers were impersonating poorly conceived White immigrant impersonations of Black persona and experience.

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[85] Hughes and Meltzer, 20 and 26.

African-American performers became part of the already established tradition of the Black-figure on a White-ground. Toll further illuminates deeper social implications of Black performers entering the minstrel tradition when he writes: "Black minstrels had to work within narrow limits because they performed for audiences that expected them to act out well-established minstrel stereotypes of Negroes."[86] By falling into an already established framework, pioneering African-American performers making their first mass entrance into the entertainment industry were themselves aiding the establishment and institutionalization of the Black image as national buffoons; supporting the function of the hegemonic ideological construct to naturalize itself into the "common sense" of a culture and society.

Among the early Negro minstrel companies, in addition to Lew Johnson's Plantation Company mentioned earlier, was the Georgia Minstrels and the Colored Hamtown Singers. Charles Hicks, a Negro, organized the all-Negro Georgia Minstrels in 1865. He had trained musicians who actually played in concert halls.[87] But the success of Hicks's group presented yet another paradox and points again to the perverted nature of the minstrel practice.

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[86] Toll, 273.

[87] Lofton Mitchell, Black Drama: The Story of the American Negro in the Theatre, New York: Hawthorn Books 1967, 40.

With the fame and popularity of the Georgia Minstrels came invitations to appear at major concert halls. Yet, because Hicks was a Negro he was not able to represent the group as manager in dealings with White concert hall owners and promoters in certain parts of the country and in certain concert halls. He gave the company management responsibilities over to White manager Charles Callender. Callender changed the name of the group to "Callender's Georgia Minstrels" and "made the show into a highly lucrative attraction that toured the United States for a number of Years." This action became a necessary trend for Black managers of Black minstrel troupes who had any hope of playing large concert halls in lucrative markets.[88] Once again, Black artists were appropriated of both talent and opportunity for growth and development in a field derived from their particular and distinctive personage.

There were other Black company managers to form successful groups during this time including Richards and Pringle, Hicks and Sawyer, and McCade and Young.[89] Famous Negro minstrel artists also developed. Among the most notable were Billy Kersands, Sam Lucus and James Bland, composer of "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" and "In the Evening By the Moonlight." All followed in the tradition

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[88] Hughes and Meltzer, 27.

[89] Hughes and Meltzer, 27.

that had been established by White companies, while utilizing their presence as opportunity for limited and careful attempts at changing the negative nature of the minstrel form.

But the task of changing the minstrel construct was difficult, since even the developing African-American audience came to expect some of the same stereotypes as White audiences. Toll explains, "[w]ithin these restrictions, however, black minstrels began to modify plantation caricatures and first attracted large numbers of black people to American popular entertainment."[90] Certainly it may be argued that Black audiences decoded these images in different ways from White audiences. And to acknowledge such a reality is to highlight yet another paradox of the peculiar American institution called minstrelsy.

Clearly, minstrelsy was troublesome. For Whites it became a reason to laugh at Blacks and consider them inferior. It literally sanctioned a national institution of racism. For African-Americans, minstrelsy encoded and embedded an inferior expectation of character and created a further reason and need to decenter and dispel this construct of African-American image.

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[90] Toll, 273.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century a group of Negro theatrical pioneers, many of them part of an Association of Negro Entertainers oddly named "The Frogs,"[91] plotted the deliberate destruction of the minstrel pattern. Among these men were Sam T. Jack, Bert Williams, George Walker, Jesse Shipp, Alex Rogers, S. H. Dudley, Bob Cole, J. Rosamond Johnson and John W. Isham. Black theatre historian Lofton Mitchell suggests that the actions of these men helped pave the way for the million-dollar musical pattern which today dominates the American theatre.[92] They did it by eventually creating shows that told stories rather than simply presenting a series of variety acts or production numbers. These shows were also different from European operettas which tended to focus more on the high form of operatic singing.

The process of attempting to change the minstrel structure and form began in 1891 when Sam T. Jack, a member of the Association of Negro Entertainers and manager of a circuit of burlesque theatre houses, created an innovative musical called The Creole Show. Jack's production was formatted along minstrel lines. However, he added the novel feature of a chorus of beautiful singing and dancing Negro females. The show premiered in Boston and moved to

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[91] See Hughes and Meltzer page 60 for photo of formal dressed memebers of this association.

[92] Mitchell, 40-41.

Chicago where it was performed at Sam T. Jack's Opera House during the entire season of the Chicago World's Fair. The Creole Show was seen in different forms for a period of five years.

In 1895 John W. Isham, who had been an advance agent for The Creole Show, made another advance. He organized and produced a musical called The Octoroons which broke further from the minstrel pattern. Next, Isham produced Oriental America which made an even greater departure from minstrelsy by ending with an operatic medley rather than the traditional cakewalk or rousing "grand-walkaround."[93]

In 1898 Bob Cole, assisted by Billy Johnson, wrote, produced and directed A Trip to Coontown, a musical with a plot which completely broke with the minstrel tradition by telling a story through music, song and dance. It opened at New York City's Third Avenue Theatre in April and later moved to the Grand Opera House in New York on September 12 of that same year.

Also in 1898, Negro composer Will Marion Cook wrote Clorindy: The Origin of the Cakewalk with poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. It was original and outstanding because it introduced a new kind of syncopated music which would become know as ragtime. The show was also referred to as the first Negro operetta. Clorindy featured the famous

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[93] Mitchell, 48.

Negro comic Ernest Hogan and it ran through the summer of 1898. The show was produced by one of New York's leading White musical producers George W. Lederer, and was shown at the Casino Roof Garden, making it the first Negro show on Broadway, though not in a legitimate theatre house.[94]

The team of Egbert Austin "Bert" Williams and George Nash Walker met in San Francisco sometime around 1896. Eventually they met writer-director-actor Jesse Shipp in Chicago and laid plans for working together in full-length musicals that would utilize their talents without resorting to minstrelsy. Moving to New York City, Williams and Walker played their comedy routines for a twenty-eight week run at Koster and Bial's. They followed this with their own shows; The Sons of Ham, The Policy Players and their rousing 1903 hit Broadway musical comedy In Dahomey. In Dahomey had a book by Jesse Shipp, music by Will Marion Cook and lyrics by Paul Laurence Dunbar; all were members of the Association of Negro Entertainers. This was followed by Abyssinia in 1906 and Bandanna Land in 1908. All of these shows were hits in New York and in Europe. All of the shows had plot lines with serious, though comic, stories and music that carried the story forward.[95] This

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[94] Mitchell, 45-52.

[95] Mitchell, 49-51.

was a departure from the simple variety act and short segmented afterpiece format of the minstrel show.

The "Theatrical Trust Syndicate" was developed in 1896 spearheaded by Abraham Erlanger, Charles Frohman, Al Hyman, Samuel Nordlinger and J. Fred Zimmerman.[96] The Syndicate controlled Broadway theatre houses for sixteen years and was the major booking agent for newly developing "combination shows" or road shows. The practices of the Syndicate were dominated by the desire for power and money. They joined a growing anti-Negro sentiment in the theatre in favor of profits over aesthetics.

Mitchell reports that the Negro musical comedy pattern began to run thin with White critics and audieneces. By 1900 New York City witnessed its fourth race riot and "[v]iolent and vicious acts were committed against the black American."[97] From about 1910 through 1917 few, if any, Negroes worked on Broadway. The lone exception was Bert Williams. Since the illness of his partner Geroge Walker in 1908, Williams was invited to join the Broadway company of Abraham Erlanger's Follies as a solo act. Walker later died in 1911. Mitchell laments, "the gallant performers who had destroyed minstrelsy and created the American musical form found themselves again evicted from

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[96] Mitchell, 54.

[97] Mitchell, 54.

the mainstream and chased to upper Manhattan where they had to work alone."[98]

During the Negroes' exile from Broadway, theatre by and for Blacks thrived in Harlem. Many of these shows were musicals or versions of popular Broadway plays. The most popular and famous of the Harlem Theatres was the Lafayette. The Lafayette Theatre had an established company of actors who worked at presenting a regular schedule of performances alternating with films. The company was developed and headed by Anita Bush, who had been a chorus actor in the Williams and Walker company and a veteran of all of their musicals. But the Lafayette company primarily presented Negro versions of Broadway plays and their own musical review shows.

In Chicago a resident company of "serious" Black actors called The Pekin Players became known for performing "refined" White plays in white-face make-up. It appears that African-American theatre was in a period of psychological and ontological confusion.

Negro artists were working, but working without a self identified philosophical foundation. These artists had become almost completely objectified. They had fallen victim to the wills of American cultural hegemony. Sister

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[98] Mitchell, 53.

Francesca Thompson provides some understanding of this situation:

> The history of the minstrel show in America supports the view that, for many performers as well as for the majority of audiences, the Black man could be represented on the stage only in a manner conceived in some people's minds as an indolent, lazy-lipped buffoon with handkerchief-wrapped head. This outlandish "typical Negro" became, unhappily, the stock Negro character of the American theatre.[99]

Here Thompson identifies a warranted assessment of the Black-figure on the White-ground of American Theatre. It was a time for investigation of the relationship of power to the subject/ object configuration in regard to African-American identity and image. It was time to address questions of aesthetics, to develop guidelines for the development and protection of cultural property. The next chapter will examine theories in the form of manifestoes and essays on the subject of Negro theatre as such writings were developed in relation to this particular time and need.

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[99] Sister M. Francesca Thompson, O.S.F., "The Lafayette Players, 1915-1932" in " The Theater of Black Americans: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed., Errol Hill, New York: Applause Books 1987, 211.

Chapter 3

THE HISTORICAL FORMATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN DRAMATIC THEORY: CREATING A 'NEW NEGRO' IMAGE

For African-Americans the era directly preceding and during the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s in the United States was "a period of undeniable excitement and artistic development."[100] Serendipitously, this excitement had to do with the exile of Negroes from Broadway and the forced establishment of a separatre theatre in Harlem. The previous chapter (pp. 62-63) explains the rise of the Harlem theatre movement with shows at the Lafayette Theatre and the odd development of Black actors in white-face make-up. But the musical comedy Shuffle Along by Eubie Blake, Noble Sissle, Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles appeared in 1921, providing "a concrete

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[100] Helen Armstead Johnson, "Shuffle Along : Keynote of the Harlem Renaissance" in The Theater of Black Americans: Volume 1, ed., Errol Hill, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980) 126-135. Johnson explains the significance of Shuffle Along as a catalyst for the expression of new African-American images and ideas.

reflection of the 'New Negro's' determination to reject outwardly imposed restrictions upon black creativity."[101] This musical took the Negro back to the Broadway stage with vigor and power.

In 1923 Willis Richardson's one-act play, The Chip Woman's Fortune, became the first non-musical drama written by an African-American presented on Broadway, although this distinction is often given to Garland Anderson's 1925 full-length production of Appearances.[102] More important, the 1920s is a notable epoch in the study of African-American dramatic tradition because of the proliferation of positions taken by theorists and practitioners of Black culture as evidenced by writings in Negro journals such as The Crisis, the news publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Opportunity Magazine: A Journal of Negro Life published by the National Urban League.

There was widespread recognition of African-American creative artists of all types; painters, sculptors, concert performers, and writers of literature, drama, literary critics and essayist of dramatic theory. The essays and manifestoes published during this time on Negro dramatic theory were the beginnings of a written tradition of

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[101] Johnson, 126.

[102] Mitchell, 84.

African-American creative aesthetics. They have a particular focus in the realization of the need for African-American artists to define and assert themselves by their own standards and in their own words. The task was to protest and revolt against a constructed image of Negro character and persona as establish by a White hegemonic theatrical structure and to assert a "New Negro" image of creative beings with spiritual depth and prophetic potential. The Harlem Renaissance was then, among other things, the beginning of African-America's intellectual search for self-expressive identity in the Arts and Humanities.

The search for self identity was evident in the artistic spirit of African-American artists who developed during this time. That search may be seen more clearly by mapping a path of purposeful "reason" for the development of a theoretical discourse that came to fruition during the 1920s in Harlem. In this chapter we will discuss and evaluate such a discourse.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in "Race," Writing, and Difference, outlines the historical need for African-Americans to literally write themselves into an identity. Such a need was a demand of the Enlightenment Era as a justifying criterion for a people's right to be considered human and worthy of respect as such. It was thought that the entitlement to humanness was primarily based on the

ability to express oneself in writing, a concrete sign of the ability to reason.[103] Robert Stepto, in From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative, introduced the term "strategies of authentication" to identify a need of minority writers to utilize various means to legitimize and gain control of meaning in their written works, which had often been misread or made oppositional by authoritative White critics.[104] This supports a need for African-Americans to record self identity through the skill and task of literally writing themselves into existence. In 1983 French scholar, Geneviève Fabre, spoke of African-American Theatre's historical "quest for identity" growing out of "historical conflict."[105] This quest for a new identity in opposition to that created for Negroes and developed prior to the proliferation of self-empowering writings of the 1920s is what will be examined here.

After the Civil War and emancipation, as Negroes became more and more an integral part of American life, and a disturbing social problem, White playwrights looking to create a more "truthful national drama" began to use Negro

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[103] Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,ed., "Race," Writing, and Difference, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1986.

[104] Robert B. Stepto, From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative, Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1979.

[105] Geneviève Fabre, Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP 1983, 1.

characters as a fresh source of dramatic material rather than comic figures and created what came to be known as American "problem drama[s]".[106] Most mentioned of such writers were Dion Boucicault, Edward Shelton, Eugene O'Neill, Paul Green, Ridgely Torrence, Marc Connelly, and George Sklar. These dramatists acquired significant status in the history of American drama. Sterling Brown believed that in the cases of a few of these writers their overall success was due in large part to their use of Negroes as themes and objects of focus in their works.[107]

The Negro characters in these plays were not so much deliberate clowns as they had been in minstrels shows. These characters were usually loyal and caring about "the Master's" possessions or examples of the Master's miscegenational dealings. Though many of these dramas helped to influence the antislavery movement, according to Brown, overall they performed at least two disservices to the Negro population:

> they glorified the Negro's submissiveness and they fostered the error that the mixed blood characters, merely because they were nearer white, were more intelligent and militant, and therefore more tragic in their enslavement.[108]

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[106] Sterling Brown, "Early Drama of Negro Life (To 1916)," in Negro Poety and Drama, New York: Antheneum 1937. Reprint Negro Poety and Drama and The Negro in American Fiction, New York: Antheneum 1968, 112.

[107] Brown, 103.

[108] Brown, 109.

Thus, there was now a more serious need than before for Negroes to take agency and assert for themselves a positive racial identity and dispel the White constructed image of the darker, dumber, dangerous "other" being.

From the earliest portrayals of Blacks in American drama through the development and institutionalization of the minstrel show and "problem dramas," the Negro was given little if any respect or justice on American stages. Serious comprehensive treatments and important revelations of Negro life and character were still waiting to be revealed in American drama. Two new streams were to contribute: the treatment of folk life with sympathy and understanding, and the careful study of Negro social experience.[109] While Negro folk life was addressed by many of the aforementioned White playwrights, the focus on Negro social experience was led by African-America's first trained sociologist; the Harvard-educated Ph.D., leader of Negro social reform, organizer of the Niagara Movement[110], and one of the founders and only Negro member of the Board

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[109] Brown, 113-114.

[110] The "secret sessions of the Niagara Movement" was a meeting called by DuBois in July of 1905. Twenty-nine members of the "Talented Tenth" met at Fort Erie, Ontario, Canada, to discuss the plight of Negroes in the United States and to construct a list of eight radical demands. It was "the first national organization of Negroes which aggressively and unconditionally demanded the same civil rights for their people which other Americans enjoyed." See Elliot M. Rudwick, W. E. B. Du Bois: Propagandist of the Negro Protest, New York: Anteneum 1968, 94-119.

of Directors for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Dr. William Edward Burghardt DuBois.

In the Spring of 1903, the tone and dilemma of attempts by African-Americans to project their own images in a universe which had been hostile toward such an endeavor was established when DuBois published The Souls of Black Folk, which was described by James Weldon Johnson as having "a greater effect upon and within the Negro race in America than any other single book published in this country since Uncle Tom's Cabin [sic]."[111] In this important first step toward a theoretical foundation and focus for self expressive Negro stage image, DuBois proclaimed:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is sort of seventh son [sic], born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged

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[111] Elliot M. Rudwick, W. E. B. Du Bois: Propagandist of the Negro Protest, New York: Anteneum 1968, 68. Originally published by the University of Pennsylvania Press under the title, W. E. B. Du Bois: A Study in Minority Group Leadership 1960. Rudwick quotes from James Weldon Johnson, Along This Way, New York 1933, 203.

> strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[112]

The anguish that DuBois expresses in this work is surpassed by the acknowledgment of a special duality inherent in the very idea of the African as American. This duality combines elements of ancient African notions of intuitive power and spiritual destiny with New World ideas of progressive materialism in the dialectical manifestation of the African-American.

In DuBois's opinion, the dual nature of the African-American makes it possible to view the complexities of the world, and especially the United States, through unique eyes. With this dual vision, the curse of material degradation is overshadowed by a clairvoyant gift for "second-sight" or intuition. The physical and psychological oppressiveness of an American hegemony is eclipsed by the African's "dogged strength" and will to survive. The Americanization of the African motivates a new "creolized" spirit that aspires not merely to survive, but to live freely in the pursuit of happiness and beauty. According to DuBois, living within the dual consciousness of an African-American (Black-figure on a White-ground) does not totally reject all other ideas, but allows for the enrichment of those ideas with the insightful spirit of

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[112] William E. B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk, in Three Negro Classics, New York: Avon 1965. Original pub. 1903, 214-215.

subconscious understanding. The challenge of DuBois' statements is to expose that potential which dwells within the dual spirit of the African as American: to acknowledge the Dasein[113] of being Black in the United States and to assert the positive potentials inherent to such a reality.

In The Souls of Black Folk, DuBois wrote a great deal about the relation and importance of music in the lives of African-Americans. Chapters One and Fourteen of the work, which deal most directly with artistic endeavors, are entitled "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" and "Of the Sorrow Songs," respectively. Spiritual music was and is a unique phenomenon drawn from the emotional and experiential realms of Black American slaves. It is a music of sorrowful strivings that expresses profound determination and faith in things hoped for but impossible to see through materialist, positivist eyes. Spiritual music would later evolve into blues, jazz, gospel, rhythm and blues (R&B or soul) and rap music, all of which express expectations of or belief in a magical mode of escaping physical and psychological anguish. The expressiveness presented in all forms of African-American music and dance is a kind of material manifestation of the unique spiritual nature of

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[113] Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. S. Robinson, New York: Harper, 1962. The term is German for "being there." It was used by Heidegger in his investigation of human existence. Dasein is concerned with understanding, participation and involvement in the world around us. This philosophy is based on the question: "What does it mean 'to be'?"

Africans as Americans and should be acknowledged and accepted as such.

DuBois felt that Negro people were "essentially musical, artistic, humble, and jocular"; traits considered sterotypical in earlier times which he now felt provided a necessary complement to American commercialism.[114] Eric Sundquist contends that DuBois was quite taken with dramatic form as a means of social and political argument. He feels that DuBois understood the enormous potential of theatre as a means of positive propaganda for the uplifting of his race. Sundquist speaks of the "pageant-like scenes in Darkwater, Dark Princess, The Quest for the Silver Fleece, and Dusk of Dawn, to name just a few of [DuBois'] works where a kind of metaphysical lifting of the veil, as though on a stage, is in operation."[115]

DuBois made an early attempt at using the stage as a propaganda medium with his own writing of The Star of Ethiopia, a dramatic pageant first staged in New York City in October of 1913, as part of the National Emancipation Exposition, celebrating fifty years of Negro freedom from slavery. In a 1915 article of the same title, "The Star of Ethiopia" in The Crisis magazine, he explains the troubled,

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[114] Rudwick, 63.

[115] Eric J. Sundquist, ed., The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader, New York: Oxford UP 1996, 303-304.

but necessary process of producing the first presentation of the pageant:

> What a task that was! I have been through a good many laborious jobs and had to bear on many occasions accusations difficult to rest under, but without doubt the New York Emancipation Exposition was the worst of all my experiences. Such an avalanche of altogether unmerited and absurd attacks it had never been my fortune to experience. Yet through it all one thing became clearer - the Pageant must be tried. We must attempt, at least, this one new thing in the dead level of uninteresting exhibitions.[116]

The pageant was essentially a retelling of the story of Blacks in Africa and in the New World. It was presented in grand style with hundreds of performers and elaborate costuming. Sundquist surmised: "[t]he moral dimension of African American art is implicit in DuBois's pageant, just as it is in much of his fiction."[117] The success of the first presentation of the pageant, despite the trouble involved in mounting it, was evidently inspiring for DuBois, for he wrote of the public's response and his own reaction:

> Literally, thousands besieged our doors and the sight of the thing continually made the tears arise. After these audiences aggregating 14,000, I said: the Pageant is the thing. This is what the people want and long for. This is the gown and paraphernalia in which the message of education and reasonable race pride can deck itself.[118]

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[116] DuBois, "The Star of Ethiopia," The Crisis, Vol. 11, December 1915, 91-93.

[117] Sundquist, 304.

The pageant was later presented in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. In August of 1916, DuBois provides a full accounting on the beginning, development, and subsequent presentations of the work in an article which defined his opinion of the theatrical potentials for Negroes.

In this article, "The Drama Among Black Folk,"[119] DuBois refers again to the essential dramatic potentials of Negroes. While this may seem contradictory in light of the negative reactions to White statements concerning the "natural talents" of Negroes, DuBois's concern was always addressed toward the serious dramatic potentials of Negro life and the expressive spirituality awaiting release from the oppressed souls within the race. Most often, comments by Whites in this regard were in acknowledgment of Negro abilities as song and dance entertainers. Here DuBois writes of the dramatic heritage of Negroes as personified by the regal splendor he recreates in the pageant of The Star of Ethiopia:

> The Negro is essentially dramatic. His greatest gift to the world has been and will be a gift of art, of appreciation and realization of beauty. Such was his gift to Egypt, even as the dark Herald cried in the second scene of the pageant:
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> *"Hear ye, hear ye! All them that come to know the truth and listen to the tale of the Wisest and Gentlest of the Races of Men whose*

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[118] DuBois, "Ethiopia," 91-93.

[119] DuBois, "The Drama Among Black Folk," The Crisis, Vol. 12, August 1916, 169-173.

> *faces be Black. Hear ye, hear ye! And learn the ancient Glory of Ethiopia, All-Mother of men, whose wonders men forgot. See how beneath the Mountains of the Moon, alike in the Valley of Father Nile and in ancient Negro-land and Atlantis the Black Race ruled and strove and fought and sought the Star of Faith and Freedom even as other races did and do. Fathers of Men and Sires of Children golden, black and brown, keep silence and hear this mighty word."*[120]

The speech of the Herald, in italics above, is one of several in this work. One leads each section of the seven sections of the pageant. The scope of DuBois's artistic ideology is expressed by the use of regal language, denoting a grandness of spirituality and ritualistic ceremony which DuBois used for the pragmatic purpose of raising the level of Negro consciousness. By raising the spirit of the possible within the Negro community, DuBois hoped to ignite a movement which saw theatrical presentations of this nature as a potential liberating force. DuBois compared his pageant to African theatrical philosophy and explained:

> All through Africa pageantry and dramatic recital is close mingled with religious rites and in America the "Shout" of the church revival is in its essential pure drama.[121]

This connection between Africa and the American Black church may have been DuBois's way of helping Negro people identify with his purposes by providing reference to a

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[120] DuBois, "Drama Among Black Folk," 169-173. Italics from the original indicates the actual lines of the Herald.

[121] DuBois, "Drama Among Black Folk," 169-173.

familiar mode of spiritual vigor and understanding. His words seek to identify an emotional depth inherent within the race for the playing of prophetic dramatic insights and truths.

Further into this article, DuBois points out the dramatic potential of Blacks to play tragedy by highlighting the achievements of the Black actor, Ira Aldridge. He explains Aldridge's successes, distinguished honors and appreciation in Europe while contrasting the conditions of Black artists in America who had to continuously fight the power of stereotypical characters and images created by the minstrel tradition. Ultimately, DuBois felt that something needed to be done to aid the fight against the degrading minstrel image of American Negroes. His pageant, The Star of Ethiopia, was a possible answer. He closes this article with the statement:

> The great fact has been demonstrated that pageantry among colored people is not only possible, but in many ways of unsurpassed beauty and can be made a means of uplift and education and the beginning of a folk drama. On the other hand, the white public has shown little or no interest in the movement. The American Pageant Association has been silent, if not actually contemptuous, and there have been within my own race the usual petty but hurting insinuations of personal greed and selfishness as the real incentives behind my efforts.[122]

While there may have been excitement about the potential of pageantry as an invigorating and stimulating form of Negro

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[122] DuBois, "Drama Among Black Folk," 169-173.

theatre, DuBois appeared burdened by the lack of support for his endeavors. His comment concerning The American Pageant Association is important when one understands that pageantry during the turn of the twentieth century in the United States was a widely developing form of theatrical presentation. So large in fact, that a Pageant Association was formed to support and aid such presentations. Yet, according to DuBois, his pageant of Negro was essentially ignored.

Earlier in the same article, DuBois looked for a connection and direction for the next step in the development of a Negro theatre. He writes:

> In later days Cole and Johnson and Williams and Walker lifted minstrelsy by sheer force of genius into the beginning of a new drama. White people refused to support the finest of their new conceptions. . . . Recently, however, with the growth of a considerable number of colored theatres and moving picture places, a new and inner demand for Negro drama has arisen which is only partially satisfied by the vaudeville actors. Today in Harlem it is being curiously supplied by setting companies of colored actors to playing recent Broadway successes. . . . The next step will undoubtedly be the slow growth of a new folk drama built around the actual experience of Negro American life.[123]

The "new drama" spoken of, as presented by Cole, Johnson, Williams and Walker, referenced the musical comedy shows with plot lines that were a part of the deliberate attack by Negro showmen on the form and structure of the minstrel

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[123] DuBois, "Drama Among Black Folk," 169-173.

tradition.[124] The mention of new companies of "colored theatres," with specific reference to Harlem's Lafayette company playing Negro versions of White Broadway fare, seems to illustrate DuBois' disappointment that these companies only imitated White theatrical productions of the Broadway stage. He calls for a theatre which will eventually display "the actual experience of Negro American life." Such a theatre would eventually develop as the 1920s approached, but it was not the Negro writer who would successfully create it.

In 1921, DuBois published a short article in the Opinion Department section of The Crisis entitled, "Negro Art."[125] In this article he actually praises the work of White playwrights like Edward Shelton, Ridgely Torrence and Eugene O'Neill, who wrote plays with Negro characters and about Negro experiences. DuBois rails against Negroes, particularly "educated Negroes," who did not approve of certain portrayals of Negroes in these plays, especially those characters who represented criminals, prostitutes and in another part of the article he includes villains. To this, DuBois exclaimed:

> We have a right, in our effort to get just treatment, to insist that we produce something

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[124] See the later part of the previous chapter (pg. 57) for information concerning the deliberate efforts by Negro artists to combat the minstrel tradition.

[125] DuBois, "Negro Art," The Crisis, vol. 22 (June 1921): 55-56.

> of the best in human character and that it is unfair to judge us by our criminals and prostitutes. This is justifiable propaganda.
>
> On the other hand we face the Truth of Art. We have criminals and prostitutes, ignorant and debased elements just as all folk have. When the artist paints us he has a right to paint us whole and not ignore everything which is not as perfect as we would wish it to be. The black Shakespeare must portray his black Iagos as well as his white Othellos.
>
> We shrink from this. We fear that evil in us will be called racial, while in others it is viewed as individual. We fear that our shortcomings are not merely human but foreshadowings and threatenings of disaster and failure. The more highly trained we become the less can we laugh at Negro comedy - we will have it all tragedy and the triumph of dark Right over pale Villainy.[126]

This was DuBois' demand for total equality of character. It was a warning that the Negro image might not be best represented by only allowing character presentations that were in total opposition to previous stage stereotypes. He felt that the true character of Negroes must be presented in all its completeness:

> We stand today secure enough in our accomplishment and self-confidence to lend the whole stern human truth about ourselves to the transforming hand and seeing eye of the Artist, white and black, and Sheldon, Torrence and O'Neill are our great benefactors - forerunners of artists who will yet arise in Ethiopia of the Outstretched Arm.[127]

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[126] DuBois, "Negro Art," 55-56.

[127] DuBois, "Negro Art," 55-56. The reference here to "Ethiopia of the Outstretched Arm" is one of DuBois's terms for Negro American potential.

Certainly what DuBois saw in the White playwrights who were first to display and gain success with plays of "true Negro life and experience," was a guiding force and opening of the way for true Negro writers to follow on this new forged path. Sterling Brown, in "Early Drama of Negro Life (To 1916)," explained another aspect of the situation of White writers writing about Negro experience and the dilemma of the time period when he wrote:

> the intimacy with Negro life requisite for the types of drama still necessary is in the main to be expected from Negro playwrights. And, without a theatre for apprenticeship in their craft, Negro playwrights are sorely handicapped. Without their own audience, they are doubly handicapped. The tyranny exerted by the Broadway audience, however enlightened it is becoming, is hard enough for a playwright whose material is less controversial. The development of a Negro audience does not seem immediately forthcoming. There is a Negro theatrical tradition, that of the song and dance show, with blackface skits interspersed. Certain critics, among them Max Reinhardt, see great possibilities in combining the swiftness and vitality of these shows with something worth saying dramatically, and they prophesy a new dramatic form. So far this hope is unrealized.[128]

Here was an important situation being confronted; the lack of Negro plays by Negro writers with enough excitement and energy or "swiftness and vitality" to attract and build Negro audiences. And while Brown bears witness to the desire and potential for the "new dramatic form" it would

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[128] Brown, 139-140.

be yet a bit longer before a true Negro theatre would take solid shape.

In "Can the Negro Serve the Drama?",[129] written for Theatre magazine in 1923, DuBois looks at THE ATTITUDE OF PREJUDICE[130] in the United States and surmises:

> A visitor from Czechoslovakia or even from London, visiting the Frazee Theatre recently, would have noted some excellent acting by members of the Ethiopian Art Theatre. . . . But only a foreigner could see and judge these performances thus dispassionately. The American, with few fine exceptions, went there with his mind absolutely precluded from dispassionate judgment because these actors were of Negro descent. That one fact distorted and unbalanced everything that they said and did.[131]

DuBois refers to a 1923 production presented by the Ethiopian Art Theatre of Chicago's production of Oscar Wilde's Salome, presented with notable if not wide-spread critical attention in New York. His real point in this article is on the failure of the larger White society to see, accept or acknowledge the artistic potential of Negroes on American theatrical stages in other than comic roles. He explains an expectation of Negro characters and performers by American audiences and comments on the un-

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[129] DuBois, "Can the Negro Serve the Drama?", Theatre, July 1923. Reprinted in W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader, ed. Meyer Weinberg, New York: Harper & Row 1970, 241-246.

[130] This article includes boldfaced and capitalized heading for sections of the argument. The headings include: THE ATTITUDE OF PREJUDICE, INTERESTING EXPERIMENT, A CREDITABLE RECORD, WHAT CAN THE NEGRO DO?, and A RICH FIELD TO EXPLOIT.

[131] DuBois, "Can the Negro Serve the Drama?", 241.

institutionalized viewpoint of foreigners to appreciate and acknowledge American Negro artists; a value sense not possible for many Americans of the time.

The Ethiopian Art Players were acknowledged as an INTERESTING EXPERIMENT by DuBois. The group had been formed and directed by:

> Mr. Raymond O'Neill, who has had many years of experience with the stage both in American and in Europe, has brought together a group of professional players which he calls the Ethiopian Art Theatre. For twelve months Mr. O'Neill trained these players, seeking to develop the natural warmth and richness of their voices, their graceful and expressive movements. His effort has been not to train them in imitation of the more inhibited white actors, but to develop their peculiar racial characteristics - the freshness and vigor of their emotional responses, their spontaneity and intensity of mood, their freedom from intellectual and artistic obsessions.[132]

This new form of training and direction was indeed a bold experiment of the times. DuBois highlights the "freshness and vigor," of the performers. He praises the "emotional responses," the 'spontaneity and intensity of mood." These are the kind of exciting potentials that, in DuBois's opinion, the Negro actor could bring to the American Theatre; if only they were allowed. "Freedom from intellectual and artistic obsessions" as performed by White actors was clearly the point being made here. The focus was on the potential of Negro actors to open up the

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[132] DuBois, "Can the Negro Serve the Drama?", 243.

American theatre to new, exciting realms of acting. This was one of the ways in which the Negro could serve the drama.

The next question to be asked and answered in this article was: "What does this movement mean and what does it portend for the future of art in America?" DuBois's answer was profound and straightforward:

> First of all, it has long been the consensus of opinion among the wise that the great gift of the Negro to the world is going to be a gift of Art. This is quite contrary to popular opinion, to which the Negro means labor, sweat of brow, the bent back and bloated eye, the beast and burden-bearer. But, on the other hand, the thinker and the artist know Negro music, know the color and passion of the black man's soul, and believe that out of this already has come a great contribution to drama and more is possible in the future.[133]

Then DuBois asked: "WHAT CAN THE NEGRO DO?" To this question he posses three possibilities. First, he says that the Negro actor may be simply "an actor," and capable of performing in the same way as White actors, and in the same roles. He says this is not only practical but legitimate, thereby providing the Negro actor equal opportunity and exposing equal, if not greater, talents. However, he makes it clear:

> The interpretations which such actors would bring might and might not be vastly different from those of white actors; but there is no reason in the world why they should not make the

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[133] DuBois, "Can the Negro Serve the Drama?", 243.

> serious attempt - and in some roles they might easily excel.[134]

But more than the potential and possibilities of Negro actors to serve the drama, DuBois makes a prophetic and pragmatic statement about the potential of Negro writers and the stories of Negro experience as fodder for American theatrical purpose. He writes:

> Negroes as actors and as dramatic writers have a wonderfully rich field to exploit in their own terrible history of experience. The somber pen of some black Ibsen, the religious fervor of some Negro Tolstoy, or the light sarcasm of a black Molière have here a marvelous chance to develop. Such a development will, of course, come slowly; it will come only as the black world gains something of that leisure and detachment for artistic work which every artist must have and for which black men in America are today too poor, too bitter, too distracted by the grimness of mere living.[135]

Interesting in this statement is the double reality presented. The reality of potentials is strong and wonderful, yet, the reality of America's social conditioning and social order of 1923 was a contrasting reality of truth in the moment; preventing the possible, and thus, stunting the potential growth and development of American theatrical arts.

In 1924 DuBois revised an article he first published in a 1913 issue of Annals of the American Academy of

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[134] DuBois, "Can the Negro Serve the Drama?", 245.

[135] DuBois, "Can the Negro Serve the Drama?", 245.

Political and Social Science. The 1913 article was titled "The Negro in Literature and Art." It began:

> The Negro is primarily an artist. The usual way of putting this is to speak disdainfully of his sensuous nature. This means that the only race which has held at bay the life-destroying forces of the tropics has gained therefrom in some slight compensation a sense of beauty, particularly for sound and color, which characterizes the race. The Negro blood which flowed in the veins of many of the mightiest of the pharaohs accounts for much of Egyptian art, and indeed, Egyptian civilization owes much in its origin to the development of the large strain of Negro blood which manifested itself in every grade of Egyptian society.[136]

While these words are dramatic in tone and they begin to speak to the particular gift of Negroes to sense and appreciate beauty in art and music most specifically, this article does not address theatrical art in any particular way. Rather, it is devoted to discussion of the Negro as primarily a visual, musical and literary artist. But later, in 1924, DuBois revised the thoughts and ideas first presented in "The Negro in Literature and Art," and developed them as part of his book, The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America. He called a chapter in the book "Negro Art and Literature,"[137] and this time he

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[136] DuBois, "The Negro in Literature and Art", Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, XLIX, September, 1913. 233-237. Reprinted in W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader, ed., Meyer Weinberg, New York: Harper & Row, 1970, 231-236.

[137] DuBois, "Negro Art and Literature," in The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America, Boston: Stratford, 1924. Reprinted in The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader, ed., Eric J. Sundquist, New York: Oxford UP, 1996, 311-324.

extended the discussion to include direct and expressive reference to the Negro's potential in the area of theatre arts.

His opening paragraph for the book chapter is the same as that of the 1913 article in Annals. However, in "Negro Art and Literature," DuBois goes on to ask and answer the question of the Negro's past and present as subject of literature and art. He surmises that the Negro has been a passive yet important figure in American literature. He explains that the figure of the Negro (even though it has been a Black-figure on a most White-ground) "has been alive, it has moved, it has talked, felt and influenced." Then DuBois asks, in the minds of all who have written about this Black figure, "how has the Negro been portrayed?" He answers the question in full:

> in the days of Shakespeare and [Thomas] Southerne the black man of fiction was a man, a brave, fine, if withal overtrustful and impulsive, hero. In science he was different but equal, cunning in unusual but mighty possibilities. Then with the slave trade he suddenly became a clown and dropped from sight. He emerged slowly beginning about 1830 as a dull stupid but contented slave, capable of doglike devotion, superstitious and incapable of education. Then, in the abolition controversy he became a victim, a man of sorrows, a fugitive chased by bloodhounds, a beautiful raped octoroon, a crucified Uncle Tom, but a lay figure, objectively pitiable but seldom subjectively conceived. Suddenly a change came after Reconstruction. The black man was either a faithful old "Befoh de wah" darky worshipping lordly white folk, or a frolicking ape, or a villain, a sullen scoundrel, a violator of womanhood, a low thief and misbirthed monster.

> He was sub-normal and congenitally incapable. He was represented as an unfit survival of Darwinian natural selection. Philanthropy and religion stood powerless before his pigmy brain and underdeveloped morals. In a "thousand years"? Perhaps. But at present, an upper beast. Out of this today he is slowly but tentatively, almost apologetically rising - a somewhat deserving, often poignant, but hopeless figure; a man whose only proper end is dramatic suicide physically or morally. His trouble is natural and inborn inferiority, slight by scientific measurement but sufficient to make absolute limits to his possibilities, save in exceptional cases.[138]

This lengthy paragraph of response to the question of "how has the Negro been portrayed?" is emotional and dramatic in itself and presents feelings of frustration and anguish in the writer. DuBois seems here to express the dismay of how the Americanization of Blacks has created the development of an image in severe contrast to the opening line of this and the previous article on which it was based: "The Negro is primarily an artist" he had said. The opening statements about the Negro's sense of beauty is contrasted with the plight of his presented image over the course of time as a captive slave; evolving, by force, from "brave, fine, cunning" into "a clown, stupid, contented slave, capable of doglike devotion, superstitious and incapable of education."

DuBois goes on in "Negro Art and Literature" to address the issue of how this constructed historical image

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[138] DuBois, "Negro Art and Literature," 314-315.

continued to affect Negroes at the time of his writing (1924). While he and other Negroes may have seen themselves as "a normal human being reacting humanly to human problems," the literary and scientific image of the Negro was still negative, if it appeared at all. Yet, the great paradox of all this was, that at the same time the Negro was being ignored in mainstream literature and art, the American nation continued to discuss the Negro as a "social problem." DuBois continues:

> to the white southerner who "knows him best" he is always an idiot or a monster, and he sees him as such, no matter what is before his very eyes. And yet, with all this, the Negro has held the stage. In the South he is everything. You cannot discuss religion, morals, politics, social life, science, earth or sky, God or devil without touching the Negro. It is a perennial and continuous and continual subject of books, editorials, sermons, lectures and smoking car confabs. In the north and west while seldom in the center, the Negro is always in the wings waiting to appear or screaming shrill lines off stage.[139]

To all of this DuBois simply asked another question; "What would intellectual America do if she woke some fine morning to find no 'Negro' Problem?"

As to the specifics of a Negro stage persona, DuBois writes:

> On the stage the Negro has naturally had a most difficult chance to be recognized. He has been portrayed by white dramatists and actors, and for a time it seemed but natural for a character like Othello to be drawn, or for Southerne's

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[139] DuBois, "Negro Art and Literature," 315.

> Oroonoko to be presented in 1696 in England with a black Angola prince as its hero. Beginning, however, with the latter part of the 18th century the stage began to make fun of the Negro.[140]

Then, DuBois chronicles the development of the Negro stage persona from the the time of Shakespeare's Othello (ca. 1603-04) through the time of his writing, concluding, "There is no doubt of the Negro's dramatic genius."[141] He ends this particular discussion of Negro artists with an inspirational and optimistic statement. Speaking of the historical development of American Negro artists of all types, he wrote:

> the shrinking, modest, black artist without special encouragement had little or no chance in a world determined to make him a menial. Today the situation is changing. The Negro world is demanding expression in art and beginning to pay for it. The white world is able to see dimly beyond the color line. This sum of accomplishment then is but a beginning and an imperfect indication of what the Negro race is capable of in America and in the world. . . .[142]

These closing thoughts on the general image of the Negro as presented in all the arts may well have inspired DuBois to write more specifically about the living image and persona of the American Negro. For, also appearing in 1924 was an

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[140] DuBois, "Negro Art and Literature," 321.

[141] DuBois, "Negro Art and Literature," 322.

[142] DuBois, "Negro Art and Literature," 323-324.

essay printed in The Crisis which specifically addresses "The Negro and the American Stage."[143]

"The Negro and the American Stage" speaks clearly and directly to the need for the development of Negro voice and agency in American Theatre. The tone of DuBois's writing in this essay is less flowery and emotional than in others on the topic of Negro aesthetics. Here, he is strong and assertive with a sense of importance and urgency about the topic at hand. He begins:

> We all know what the Negro for the most part has meant hitherto on the American stage. He has been a lay figure whose business it was usually to be funny and sometimes pathetic. He has never, with very few exceptions, been human or credible. This, of course, cannot last.[144]

While previous articles on this subject seemed to bemoan the condition of the Negro stage image and persona, this article begins an aggressive forward moving drive toward self identification and self (re)construction of agency and image. He goes on:

> The most dramatic group of people in the history of the United States is the American Negro. It would be very easy for a great artist so to interpret the history of our country as to make the plot turn entirely upon the black man. Thus two classes of dramatic situations of tremendous

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[143] DuBois, "The Negro and the American Stage," The Crisis 28 (June 1924): 56-57. Reprinted in Writings in Periodicals Edited by W.E.B. Du Bois: Selections from *The Crisis*, vol. 1: 1911-1925, compiled and edited by Herbert Aptheker, Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson Organization Ltd., 1983, 404-405.

[144] DuBois, "The Negro and the American Stage," 404.

> import arise. The inner life of this black group and the contact of black and white.[145]

Now DuBois is no longer seeing or discussing just the "problems" associated with developing self image, he identifies situations with a notion of no longer being satisfied just to talk about them, but to do something constructive. His expression of an "inner life" of Negroes in opposition to an outer life necessary for "contact of black and white" is in direct correlation to the historical condition of the Negro's "private" and "public" double-consciousness and identity of the race's slave past.

As the essay continues, there is no longer a feeling of idealistic dreaming about "what should be done," or "what might be done" or even the question of "what can be done" or "how can it be." The statement now begins "It is going to be!" The authoritative statement is followed by an examination of the obstacles to be surmounted and a note on what the consequences of inaction on the part of Negroes might provide. The writing is powerful and positive.

> It is going to be difficult to get at these facts for the drama and treat them sincerely and artistically because they are covered by a shell; or shall I say a series of concentric shells? In the first place comes the shell of what most people think the Negro ought to be and this makes everyone a self-appointed and preordained judge to say without further thought or inquiry whether this is untrue or that is wrong. Then secondly there comes the great problem of the future relations of groups and

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[145] DuBois, "The Negro and the American Stage," 404.

> races not only in the United States but throughout the world. To some people this seems to be a tremendous and imminent problem and in their wild anxiety to settle it in the only way which seems to them the right way they are determined to destroy art, religion and good common sense in an effort to make everything that is said or shown propaganda for their ideas.[146]

Having identified the oppositional forces at work, DuBois then moves on to confront the immediate and potential internal problematics of the struggle which he proposes. He discusses the sensitivity of Negroes to the potential portrayals of the negative aspects of the Negro's group personality, which he refers to as "a third shell that we do not so often recognize." In regard to "the attitude of the Negro world itself"; he writes:

> The Negro world which is growing in self-consciousness, economic power and literary expression is tremendously sensitive. It has sore toes, nerve filled teeth, delicate eyes and quivering ears. And it has these because during its whole conscious life it has been maligned and caricatured and lied about to an extent inconceivable to those who do not know. Any mention of Negro blood or Negro life in America for a century has been occasion for an ugly picture, a dirty allusion, a nasty comment or a pessimistic forecast. The result is that the Negro today fears any attempt of the artist to paint Negroes. He is not satisfied unless everything is perfect and proper and beautiful and joyful and hopeful. He is afraid to be painted as he is lest his human foibles and shortcomings be seized by his enemies for the purposes of the ancient and hateful propaganda.[147]

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[146] DuBois, "The Negro and the American Stage," 404.

[147] DuBois, "The Negro and the American Stage," 404.

While DuBois uses an accent of chastisement about racial sensitivity in relation to negative portrayals, he equalizes his tonality with sociological understanding of the origins of group distrust based on the past. Yet, what remains true is the same fearful feeling within the race that DuBois addressed earlier in his 1921 article, "Negro Art," where he demanded equality of character in representations of Negro stage figures. In 1921 he wrote; "We fear that evil in us will be called racial, while in others it is viewed as individual." The fact that there is a need to still address the same fears in 1924 indicates little change in social conditions or social acceptance of Negroes in the time between the two articles. Nonetheless, "The Negro on the American Stage" ends with a strong sense of determination, at least on the part of the writer, to move ahead toward self agency. DuBois closes the essay with these lines:

> Happy is the artist that breaks through any of these shells for his is the kingdom of eternal beauty. He will come through scarred and perhaps a little embittered, certainly astonished at the almost universal misinterpretation of his motives and aims. . . .But it is work that must be done. No greater mine of dramatic material ever lay ready for the great artist's hands then the situation of men of Negro blood in modern America.[148]

In March of 1925, Survey magazine, a monthly publication with a small but elite circulation mainly

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[148] DuBois, "The Negro and the American Stage," 404-405.

comprised of persons and organizations involved in social work, philanthropy and charity work, presented a "special number" issue called the Survey Graphic which focused on Harlem. This special edition was edited by Alain Leroy Locke; graduate of Harvard and Oxford, Rhodes scholar at the University of Berlin and the Collège de France, and assistant professor of philosophy at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Locke had been hailed as the "dean" of the New Negro movement, although many took umbrage with this title and described Locke as only one of three "midwives" of the movement, along with Charles S. Johnson (editor of Opportunity magazine of the National Urban League) and Jessie Fauset (literary editor of The Crisis magazine).

While there was much controversy over the decision to make Locke editor of the important Survey special number, Arnold Rampersand says there was widespread agreement that the now famous anthology titled The New Negro: An Interpretation,[149] which resulted from the magazine edition is considered the definitive text, or the Bible, of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance movement.[150] It presents a fruition of ideas and positions taken and suggested by

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[149] Alain Locke, The New Negro: An Interpretation; New York: Albert & Charles Boni 1925. Reprinted, New York: Atheneum, 1992.

[150] Arnold Rampersand, "Introduction to the Anthenum edition of The New Negro," ed., Alain Locke, New York: Atheneum 1992, ix-xxiii.

DuBois in previous years. The youthfulness of Locke as an intellectual offspring and DuBois is important. Locke, also studied philosophy and earned a Ph.D. from Harvard University. He essentially followed the same path as DuBois in terms of his development of philosophical ideas for uplifting the Negro race in the United States.

The New Negro articulates the view that "young [Negro] writers would express their own self-concepts rather than be defined from the outside."[151] In the opening essay, "The New Negro,"[152] written by the editor, Locke presents a strong declarative position of change and new direction for the future of Negro attitudes concerning a place for themselves within the American framework. He presents a contrast between the "old" and the "new" philosophical outlook of expectations for Negro pride and purpose, explaining an aim of intellectual protest through art and cultural means. Locke writes:

> the Sociologist, the Philanthropist, the Race-leader are not unaware of the New Negro, but they are at a loss to account for him. He simply cannot be swathed in their formula. . . . The Old Negro, we must remember, was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. His has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism.[153]

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[151] Jessie Carney Smith, Images of Blacks in American Culture, New York: Greenwood Press 1988, 152.

[152] Locke, The New Negro, 3-16.

Immediately, Locke began to establish a tone of new self-worth and self-determination; an exemplification of a defiant determination to dispel the past and to signal the beginning of a new ideological image for the American Negro. This philosophy was predicated on opening awareness for a new "young" generation of Negroes, born several years after emancipation, educated and well prepared to present an unprecedented voice and persona to an America that had come to expect certain things and no more from its Negro populace. Locke's declaration of a "New Negro" was not solely intended for White Americans. As this passage indicates, his aim was also to stir and kindle awareness in the hearts and minds of Negroes of the era.

> The Negro himself has contributed his share to this through a sort of protective social mimicry forced upon him by the adverse circumstances of dependence. So for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being - a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down," or "in his place," or "helped up," to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden. The thinking Negro even has been induced to share this same general attitude, to focus his attention on controversial issues, to see himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem. His shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality.[154]

Here, Locke attempts to change the image of the Negro from without and within from "something" to "somebody." He

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[153] Locke, The New Negro, 3.

[154] Locke, The New Negro, 3-4.

explains the Negro that "was," and now calls for a group identity political move into (re)birth by accepting the new self as no longer a "problem," but a spiritual being with internal metaphysical power to overcome psychological constraints of the past.

> the mind of the Negro seems suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority. By shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation. . . .the decade that found us with a problem has left us with only a task.[155]

Locke saw, or at least hoped for, a renewal of self-respect and self-dependence within the Negro community buoyed by the energy of positive expectations brought to Harlem by Negroes from all parts of the world. He explains:

> The migrant masses, shifting from country side [sic] to city, hurdle several generations of experience at a leap, but more important, the same thing happens spiritually in the life-attitudes and self-expression of the Young Negro, in his poetry, his art, his education and his new outlook, with the additional advantage, of course, of the poise and greater certainty of knowing what it is all about.[156]

Previous to the publication of The New Negro it could have been said that the Negro's "inner objectives" were focused on repairing a damaged group psychology and reshaping a warped social perspective. This required a new mentality

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[155] Locke, The New Negro, 4.

[156] Locke, The New Negro, 4-5.

for the American Negro. Locke's publication was an attempt to show the effects of maturity toward such a goal as it developed in the mid part of the 1920s. Locke, a philosopher, seemed to aid this growing sensibility among Negroes by illustrating their growth in attitudes about themselves.

In contrast to the 1921 article by DuBois, "Negro Art," in which he scolded Negroes for their fear of stage portrayals as less than perfect beings, Locke had this to say four years later:

> In this new group psychology we note the lapse of sentimental appeal, then the development of a more positive self-respect and self-reliance; the repudiation of social dependence, and then the gradual recovery from hyper-sensitiveness and "touchy" nerves . . . and finally the rise from social disillusionment to race pride . . . the Negro to-day wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults and shortcomings, and scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not.[157]

It is difficult to say whether or not Locke's statement concerning the development of Negro race pride was completely true. However, it did denote some sort of developed perspective of the Negro public's growing self-awareness and possible new-found pride in looking at themselves. Locke's observation also indicates a possible easing of personal tensions or feelings of racial

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[157] Locke, The New Negro, 10-11.

shamefulness among Negroes that was not the case in 1921 when DuBois called attention to such racial insecurities.

Locke closes the opening essay of The New Negro by calling attention to the obvious excitement over the expectations of Negro art to break new ground in the American Negro's march toward respectability. Better yet, Locke felt that the potential for improvement in race relations might be won by the special gifts of spiritual enlightenment that Negro Art might offer to the world.

The artistic offering in The New Negro were designed to illustrate the true reality of the Negro's artistic endowments and cultural contributions. The writings were thought to prove that Negroes were capable of being full collaborators and participants to American cultural civilization. Locke declared:

> The great social gain in this is the releasing of our talented group from the arid fields of controversy and debate to the productive fields of creative expression. The especially cultural recognition they win should in turn prove the key to that revaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany any considerable further betterment of race relationships.[158]

The hope was that White America would now acknowledge and accept the cultural talents of Negro artists as proof of their right to be cultural equals. Locke ends his introductory essay with the assurance that what is presented in The New Negro shows a new generation of

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[158] Locke, The New Negro, 15-16.

Negroes adding the motives of self-expressiveness and spiritual development to the unfinished task of achieving full respectability and material progress as Americans.

Two important essays specifically focused on the nature and status of Negro theatre and drama are presented in The New Negro: "The Drama of Negro Life," by Montgomery Gregory, and "The Gift of Laughter," by Jessie Fauset. Gregory chronicles the development of Negro drama during the early twentieth century up to 1925.[159] The focus of Gregory's discussion is given to achievements in acting. He explains that, since most serious plays about Black life were written by Whites, it was only the African-American actor who had the opportunity to gain prominence on American stages. But he also looks at the potential for growth in dramatic plays by drawing similarities between Negro drama and Negro music.

> folk-music, born of the pangs and sorrows of slavery, has made America and the world his eternal debtor. The same racial characteristics that are responsible for this music are destined to express themselves with similar excellence in the kindred art of drama. The recent notable successes of Negro actors and of plays of Negro life on Broadway point to vast potentialities in this field.[160]

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[159] Montgomery Gregory, "The Drama of Negro Life," in The New Negro, ed. by Alain Locke, first publication 1925. Reprint, New York: Atheneum 1992, 153-160. Also printed in Anthology of the American Negro in the Theatre, ed., Lindsay Patterson, New York: Publishers Company, Association for the Study of Negro Life and History 1967, 25-30.

[160] Gregory, "The Drama of Negro Life," 153.

Gregory warns of the seriousness involved with the development of Negro plays and Negro characters. He points to the most popular of plays about Negro life, a dramatization of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (dramatized by J. Lacy in 1853), and speaks of the lingering effects of the Negro character of Topsy from that play:

> Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* passed into obscurity, "Topsy" survived. She was blissfully ignorant of any ancestors, but she has given us a fearful progeny. With her, popular dramatic interest in the Negro changed from serious moralistic drama to the comic phase. We cannot say that as yet the public taste has generally recovered from this descent from sentimentalism to grotesque comedy, and from that in turn to farce, mimicry and sheer burlesque.[161]

Then Gregory warns that it will be serious drama, not farcical comedy that will be the yardstick by which the Negro's contribution to the field of dramatic arts is measured:

> Serious Negro drama is a matter of recent growth and still is in its infancy. It is in this field of legitimate drama that the Negro must achieve success if he is to win real recognition in the onward sweep of American drama.[162]

Overall, Gregory's essay is a recounting of the somewhat brief history of the Negro's attempt to (re)create a viable self-image in American drama. He bemoans the misrepresentational heritage of both minstrel shows and the

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[161] Gregory, "The Drama of Negro Life," 155.

[162] Gregory, "The Drama of Negro Life," 156.

musical comedy plays that were created to combat the minstrel effects. Gregory sees them all as still unworthy of acceptable representations of Negroes in his time. Then he joins with DuBois in appreciation, if not praise, of White playwrights like O'Neill and Torrence for their attempts at presenting truer Negro characters:

> O'Neill and Torrence have shown that the ambitious dramatist has a rich and virgin El Dorado in the racial experiences of black folk. As the spirituals have risen from the folk-life of the race, so too will there develop out of the same treasure-trove a worthy contribution to a native American drama.[163]

He also praises;

> the vision of Charles S. Johnson of *The Opportunity* magazine and of W. E. B. DuBois and Jessie Fauset of *The Crisis* magazine" for the literary contests which were such "a splendid stimulus to Negro writers to begin the adequate expression of their race life.[164]

Gregory expressed his dream of what Negro theatre would evolve into when he wrote:

> Our ideal is a national Negro Theater where the Negro playwright, musician, actor, dancer, and artist in concert shall fashion a drama that will merit the respect and admiration of America. Such an institution must come from the Negro himself, as he alone can truly express the soul of his people.[165]

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[163] Gregory, "The Drama of Negro Life," 159.

[164] Gregory, "The Drama of Negro Life," 159.

[165] Gregory, "The Drama of Negro Life," 159.

This statement reveals a desire to see a newly constructed type of theatre. The call for a combination of efforts on behalf of playwrights, musicians, actors, dancers and concert artists in the creation of a "Negro Theater" was a philosophical connection to the holistic conception of African, Asian, and Native American arts, and a step beyond what was most common among American theatrical ventures of the time, except in musical theatre. The tones of a theatre separate from the mainstream of American theatre can also be heard here, and this theme would soon become one that resounded over and over again in the years to come, as we shall see.

Again Gregory agrees with DuBois as he calls for a openness of the Negro consciousness to the full spectrum of personality types on the stage:

> The race must surrender that childish self-consciousness that refuses to face the facts of its own life in the arts but prefers the blandishments of flatterers, who render all efforts at true artistic expression a laughing-stock by adorning their characters with the gaudy gowns of cheap romance.[166]

"The Drama of Negro Life" closes with an idealistic desire to see the ideology of a New Negro existence blossom and grow.

> The "New Negro," still few in number, places his faith in the potentialities of his own people - he believes that the black man has no reason to

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[166] Gregory, "The Drama of Negro Life," 159.

> be ashamed of himself, but that in the divine plan he too has a worth and honorable destiny.
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> The hope of Negro drama is the establishment of numerous small groups of Negro players throughout the country who shall simply and devotedly interpret the life that is familiar to them for the sheer joy of artistic expression.[167]

In "The Gift of Laughter,"[168] Jessie Fauset continues the discussion of great achievements by Negro actors in comedy. But the real value of Fauset's essay is in her compelling argument for the potential of these actors to project portrayals of deeply felt honest emotions in the playing of tragedy. Her position was well supported by numerous reviews of outstanding Negro actors of the time; most notable among them being Evelyn Preer, Charles Gilpin and Paul Robeson to name but a few. Fauset explains the interesting dilemma of these noteworthy actors:

> To be by force of circumstances the most dramatic figure in a country; to be possessed of the wells of feeling, of the most spontaneous instinct for effective action and to be shunted no less always into the role of the ridiculous and funny, - that is enough to create the quality of bitterness for which we are ever so often rebuked.[169]

The successes of many Negro actors in hit productions of the early 1920s as Preer in The Ethiopian Arts Players

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[167] Gregory, "The Drama of Negro Life," 159-160.

[168] Jessie Fauset, "The Gift of Laughter," in The New Negro, ed. by Alain Locke, first publication 1925. Reprint, New York: Atheneum 1992, 161-167.

[169] Fauset, "The Gift of Laughter," 165.

production of Salome, Gilpin in The Emperor Jones, Robeson in The Emperor Jones and All God's Chillun Got Wings, and the all Negro musical hits Shuffle Along, Runnin' Wild, Liza and others, had given Broadway and American theatre a kind of "verve and pep" that it had never seen before. Fauset states:

> The medley of shades, the rich colorings, the abundance of fun and spirits on the part of the players all combined to produce an atmosphere which was actually palpable, so full was it of the ecstasy and joy of living. . . . Emotionally they garnished their threadbare plots and comedy tricks with the genius of a new comic art. . . . It is this quality of vivid and untheatrical portrayal of sheer emotion which seems likely to be the Negro's chief contribution to the stage.[170]

There are numerous accounts of the energy and lively excitement generated by the presence of Negro performers on the American stage during the early 1920s. Most of it was by circumstance limited to comic and musical endeavors. But the clear consensus of the time was a growing hunger, at least among the intellectual critics of the race, to see Negro artists fulfill the potential of enlivening American theatre with their potential for emotional prowess on the stage. These concluding passages from "The Gift of Laughter" highlight the conditions present in 1925 and illuminate a hope of the years ahead that were to see

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[170] Fauset, "The Gift of Laughter," 165-166.

passionate dramas of Negro life by Negro writers emerge and stimulate American Theatre. She writes:

> The remarkable thing about this gift of ours is that it has its rise, I am convinced, in the very woes which best us. Just as a person driven by great sorrow may finally go into an orgy of laughter, just so an oppressed and too hard driven people breaks over into compensating laughter and merriment. It is an emotional salvation. . . . Not without reason has tradition made comedy and tragedy sisters and twins, the capacity for one argues the capacity for the other. It is not surprising then that the period that sees the Negro actor on the verge of great comedy has seen him breaking through to the portrayal of serious and legitimate drama. . . . All this beyond any doubt will be the reward of the "gift of laughter" which many black actors on the American stage have proffered. Through laughter we have conquered even the lot of the jester and the clown. The parable of the one talent still holds good and because we have used the little which in those early painful days was our only approach we find ourselves slowly but surely moving toward that most glittering of all goals, the freedom of the American stage.[171]

Following the declaration of "The New Negro" movement and the 1925 manifesto of the same name, Locke published an article in Theatre Arts Monthly magazine in 1926 entitled "The Negro and the American Stage."[172] It was later reprinted as part of an anthology by Edith J. R. Isaacs,

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[171] Fauset, "The Gift of Laughter," 167-167.

[172] Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," Theatre Arts Monthly, 10 (1926). Reprinted in Theatre: Essays on the Arts of the Theatre, ed., Edith J. R. Isaacs, Boston: Little, Brown and Comp. 1927, 290-303. Also in, Anthology of the American Negro in the Theatre: A Critical Approach, ed., Lindsay Patterson, New York: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History 1967, 1968, 1969, 21-24.

Theatre: Essays on the Arts of the Theatre (1927). This essay provided further discussion on the potential of the African-American actor, outlining the "possibilities for deeper, subtler influences on the technical aspects of the theatre."[173] Locke praised outstanding Negro actors of his day and questioned the influences that might be produced if they were artistically liberated from the dominating influences of White culture:

> Transpose the possible resources of Negro song and dance and pantomime to the serious stage, envisage an American drama under the galvanizing stimulus of a rich transfusion of essential folk-arts and you may anticipate what I mean. A race of actors can revolutionize the drama quite as definitely and perhaps more vitally than a coterie of dramatists.[174]

Locke, following the points made by Gregory, continued the argument that actors provided a better potential for revolutionizing American drama than did dramatists, since drama is rooted in action and emotion; purviews of the actor and a natural part of the make up of African Negroes. Locke argued that modern drama, as presented on the American stage of his era, lacked a vitality of action and emotion. He felt that since "[p]rimarily the Negro brings to the drama the gift of a temperament, not the gift of a tradition"[175] Negro performers, by expressing the emotional

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[173] Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," 290.

[174] Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," 290.

[175] Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," 291.

realities of Negro life, might provide self-conscious psychological development for the entire Negro race as well as stimulating vitality for the whole of American drama.

Locke's statement on the lack of a Negro dramatic tradition was an attack on the status quo. He argued that the status quo served to prevent the full participation and development of Negro actors. His statement was not an attempt to slight the artists who had graced American stages since the time of James Hewlett, Ira Aldridge and the African Company at the African Grove in the early 1820s, a century before his writing. Locke was attacking the common notion of Negroes as "natural born actors." While giving praise and attention to the inherent abilities of Negroes for the expression of action and emotion, Locke was well aware of the necessity of discipline and training. His statement was directed against those who used the "natural born actor" label as a disparaging remark about the limitations of the Black actor. He challenged those who felt that, Negroes only had potential for second rate talents of imitation, mimicry and clowning; that at best, their talents were restricted to interpretive rather than creative aspects of drama. To these kinds of critics, Locke pointed out that instinct and emotion are vital aspects of drama and interpretive passion is its creative force. He argued that:

> a comprehending mind knows that the very life of drama is in instinct and emotion, that drama begins and ends in mimicry, and that its creative force is in the last analysis the interpretative passion. . . .the promise of the most vital contribution of our race to the theatre lies, in my opinion, in the deep but still unemancipated resources of the Negro actor, and the folk arts of which he is as yet only a blind and hampered exponent. Dramatic spontaneity, the free use of the body and the voice as direct instruments of feeling, a control of body plastique that opens up the narrow diaphragm of fashionable acting and the conventional mannerisms of the stage - these are indisputably strong points of Negro acting.[176]

Locke realized that the training of Negro actors would provide new insights to "the narrow diaphragm of fashionable acting and the conventional mannerisms of the stage." His speculation on the potential for new styles and manners in acting was evidenced in experiences gained by Negro artists in the fight against stereotypical character requirements of the minstrel tradition.

Locke wrote of the emotional power of the serious Negro actors of his time: Opal Cooper, Inez Clough, Evelyn Preer, Rose MacClendon, Sidney Kirkpatrick, Charles Olden, Francis Corbie, and others; and of the possibilities that lay beneath the superficial exteriors of his contemporary Black artists of the vaudeville stage: Bert Williams, Florence Mills, Bill Robinson, George Stampler, Josephine Baker, Eddie Rector, Abbie Mitchell, and Ethel Waters. He explains:

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[176] Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," 291.

> Pantomime, that most essential and elemental of the dramatic arts, is a natural *forte* [sic] of the Negro actor, and the use of the body and voice and facile control of posture and rhythm are almost as noteworthy in the average as in the exceptional artist. When it comes to pure registration of the emotions, I question whether any body of actors, unless it be the Russians, can so completely be fear or joy or nonchalance or grief.[177]

He supported his argument with quotes from the renowned German director, Max Reinhardt, who, while on a visit to the United States, also saw the potential and the possibilities of contributions by Negro actors to new techniques in drama. In the words of Reinhardt:

> the drama must turn at every period of fresh creative development to an aspect which has been previously subordinated or neglected, and in this day of ours, we come back to the most primitive and the most basic aspect of drama for a new starting point, a fresh development and revival of the art - and this aspect is pantomime, the use of the body to portray story and emotion. And your people have that art - it is their special genius.[178]

It appears that Reinhardt and Locke agreed in their feelings about the unique nature of Negro acting potential. Locke explains this unique nature when he speaks of something:

> dramatic to the core that flows movingly in the blood rather than merely along the veins that we speak of as the racial endowment of the Negro actor. For however few there may be who possess

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[177] Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," 293.

[178] Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," 294.

> it in high degree, it is racial, and is in a way unique.[179]

Locke makes obvious the connection of the inner spirit of Negro artists to their "difference" and their "otherness." He further warns of the danger in imitating Eurocentric theatrical conventionalism. His charge is that Negro dramatic art must be liberated from the disparagement of external or internal limitations; have the courage to be original and experimental, and develop its own idiom, free of the confines of the established dramatic conventions. His wish is for the development of what he called "race drama" that would allow for the full potential of the Negro actor's spiritual freedom and enlightenment for the entire race. He states:

> The finest function, then, of the race drama would be to supply an imaginative channel of escape and spiritual release, and by some process of emotional reënforcement [sic] to cover life with the illusion of happiness and spiritual freedom. Because of the lack of any tradition of art to which to attach itself, this reaction has never functioned in the life of the American Negro except at the level of the explosive and abortive release of buffoonery and low comedy. Held down by social tyranny to the jester's footstool, the dramatic instincts of the race have had to fawn, crouch, and be amusingly vulgar.[180]

The ideas of spiritual freedom, spiritual release and spiritual expressiveness were all realities that were

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[179] Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," 295.

[180] Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," 300.

beginning to resound among theorists of Negro theatrical arts. It was becoming evident that in order to develop and find a voice and theatrical reality of its own, the potential of a Negro theatre would have to find a space of its own, a safe ground on which to stand and experience the uniqueness of the Negro artistic persona.

In February of 1926, DuBois published a seven-part questionnaire to ascertain from the "artists of the world" how Negro images should be portrayed on the stage. The prevailing focus of such inquiry was centered on the quest for a Negro self identity in contrast to the overshadowing negative images created by a White minstrel tradition which continued to permeate American society even after the decline of minstrelsy's reign as the country's premiere popular culture medium. The questions, written by DuBois, read as follows:

1. When the artist, black or white, portrays Negro characters is he under any obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray?
2. Can any author be criticized for painting the worst or the best characters of a group?
3. Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?
4. What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?
5. Does the situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy call for artistic treatment at least

as sincere and sympathetic as *Porgy* [sic][181] received?

6. Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them?
7. Is there not a real danger that young colored writers will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own social class? [182]

The results of the survey were published in issues of The Crisis dating from March through November, 1926.[183] One of the most interesting responses came from the young Langston Hughes who concluded: "It's the way people look at things, not what they look at that needs to be changed."[184] Hughes's statement signaled a need to begin the serious task by Negro artists of reversing the White-ground of African-American dramatic tradition established during the minstrel era. According to Hughes, what American drama needed was a new perspective, a new and different way of seeing and presenting things.

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[181] This reference is to the 1927 play Porgy by DuBose and Dorathy Heyward based on Mr. Hayward's novel of the same name.

[182] DuBois, "A Questionnaire" in Crisis, Feb. 1926.

[183] Leslie C. Sanders, The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves, 4. Also, Jessie C. Smith, Images of Blacks in American Culture, 152.

[184] Smith, 152.

As a way of insuring creative autonomy and originality in Negro artistry and to provide a safe ground for experimentation, Locke agreed with DuBois's earlier call for a "new birth" of the Negro theatre.[185] However, the focus now centered on dramaturgy rather than performers. DuBois felt that attention to actors, who were achieving more visibility than other theatre artists, was of lesser concern in the longterm establishment and stabilization of a new theatrical tradition. His major concern was with the development of dramatists who would record the expressive truths of Negro life. Here in "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre: The Story of a Little Theatre Movement," he expresses what he sees as unique qualities for a theatre of American "others":

> It is customary to regard Negroes as an essentially dramatic race; and it is probably true that tropical and sub-tropical peoples have more vivid imagination, are accustomed to expressing themselves with greater physical and spiritual abandon than most folk. And certainly, life as black and brown and yellow folk have known it is big with tragedy and comedy. The home life of Africans shows this natural dramatic tendency; the strides of the native African, the ceremony of home and assembly, the intense interest in music and play, all attest this.[186]

This statement highlights the potential of drama as developed in the private, communal realms of peoples of

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[185] DuBois, "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre: The Story of a Little Theatre Movement," The Crisis, 32.3 (1926), 134-136.

[186] DuBois, "Krigwa," 134.

color. Differences in ethnic demeanor and cultural customs make honest expression of personal dramatic tendencies difficult to expose in mainstream society, particularly when critical evaluation by the dominant hegemony has historically been negative and degrading. Seeing this problem, DuBois's plan sounded the need for a theatre physically removed from the American mainstream. This was a view in agreement with Locke's call for African-American actors to have a theatre of their own with the safety and freedom to express the actions and emotions of their existence. Fauset had made similar suggestions in her "The Gift of Laughter."

Until this time, Black performers had been required "to entertain [a] more or less alien group." The demands of "alien" White audiences, with their preconceived notions of acceptable images, had established a norm and expectation for Negroes in theatre. Major efforts to combat such images usually resulted in productions of Shakespeare or contemporary Broadway successes with all Black casts imitating White productions. This had been the case just prior to the 1920s with the Anita Bush Players and the Lafayette Theatre of Harlem, and most especially for the acclaimed and respected Pekin Players of Chicago, who were known for performing White plays in whiteface.[187]

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[187] See, Sister M. Francesca Thompson, O.S.F., "The Lafayette Players, 1917-1932" in The Theater of Black Americans: Volume 2, ed.,

The new movement that DuBois called for began in Harlem and established four fundamental principles for companies in cities with large Negro populations such as Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and elsewhere. DuBois's intent was to inspire the creation of "Little Negro Theatre Groups" throughout the country. His fundamentals were a means to establishing a unified purpose for such an endeavor. The four fundamentals are still held as hallmarks of dramaturgical criteria for "serious" African-American theatre. The rules dictate, that in order to qualify as "true" or "serious," Negro-American theatres and dramas must be:

> 1. About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. By us. This is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. For us. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. Near us. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people. [188]

DuBois felt that adherence to these rules was the only way in which serious and authentic dramas of African-American experience could be developed. Using the four fundamentals as required criteria, literary contests conducted by The Crisis, under the editorship of DuBois and the literary management of Fauset, mined a substantial number of serious

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Errol Hill, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall 1980, 13-32.

[188] DuBois, "Krigwa," 134

plays about African-American life for publication and performance. Throughout the era, prevailing theoretical themes attempted to focus Negro artistic aspirations on creating a new image of Black life. Potential was seen as possible only if Negroes could tap into their inherent spiritual power and expose positive and realistic images of themselves in situations unplagued by the dominating influences of White society.

The high point of this search for a defining aesthetic aphorism toward the development of a Negro theatre during the 1920s, is DuBois's "Criteria of Negro Art,"[189] an address given at the June 1926 Chicago NAACP National Conference, in which DuBois announced his view that "all art is propaganda." One finds that his adage refers primarily to DuBois's deeply held belief in the ethical and political responsibility of art and literature as a developmental tool for the Negro race. What DuBois delivers in this address is essentially a manifesto of Negro/ Black/ African-American art and theatre for all times. It might arguably be called "DuBois's Poetics." It is primarily concerned with the aesthetic or concepts of beauty as related to a Negro/ Black/ African-American world

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[189] DuBois, "Criteria of Negro Art: Address to the Annual Meeting of the NAACP, June 1926, Chicago," The Crisis, Vol. 32, October 1926, 290-297. Reprinted in W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader, ed., Meyer Weinberg, New York: Harper & Row, 1970, 251-260. Also in, The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader, ed., Eric J. Sundquist, New York: Oxford UP 1996, 304.

view. Yet it is profoundly pragmatic as both a foundation for the development of such an artistic view, and a sustaining guide for future growth and development.

The fact that DuBois chose to deliver this aesthetic message to the political and economic organization, the NAACP, during its early years of development is also rather significant. It highlights his belief that the arts, artistic sensibility and beauty in life and the spirit of Black Americans is very important to the well being and the future of the race. The aesthetic of Negro arts represented to DuBois a "forward and upward look - a pushing onward."[190] The language of the manifesto is eloquent, dramatic and ethereal. It speaks to the heart as well as the mind. The foresight and vision of the power and purpose of the arts, and particularly the theatre, in DuBois's speech is inspiring to read and must have made a great impression upon a live audience. Here he speaks of the Negroes past suffering and suggests that now the suffering should be for a potential artistic beauty.

> pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we had the true spirit; if we had the Seeing Eye, the Cunning Hand, the Feeling Heart; if we had, to be sure, not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work, the inevitable suffering that always comes with life; sacrifice and waiting, all that - but, nevertheless, lived

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[190] DuBois, "Criteria" in Reader by Weingerg, 251.

> in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America. . . After all, who shall describe Beauty? What is it?[191]

The beauty of spirit is expressed in the willingness to share with America, a society which has been the cause of so much pain and oppression for the Negro race. Yet, DuBois suggests that the potential of Negro art will be for illuminating all of America. This highlights the spiritual expectations of Negro art. He describes four beautiful things: The Cathedral at Cologne; a village in West Africa; a room with broken pieces of the Venus de Milo; a single phrase of music of the American South; and he declares:

> Such is Beauty. Its variety is infinite, its possibility is endless. . . . The world is full of it; and yet today the mass of human beings are choked away from it, and their lives distorted and made ugly. This is not only wrong, it is silly. Who shall right this well-nigh universal failing? Who shall let this world be beautiful? Who shall restore to men the glory of sunsets and the peace of quiet sleep?. . . . We black folk may help, for we have within us as a race new stirrings; stirrings of the beginning of a new appreciation of joy, of a new desire to create, of a new will to be; as though in this morning of group life we had awakened from some sleep that at once dimly mourns the past and dreams a splendid future.[192]

DuBois attempts to inspire a feeling of spiritual power within the Negro race. The inner stirrings of the "new

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[191] DuBois, "Criteria" in Reader by Weingerg, 252-253.

[192] DuBois, "Criteria" in Reader by Weingerg, 253.

Negro" is particularly focused on the youth, who must take these insights into the future. He associates truth with beauty, and it appears that he is calling for the masses to trust the beauty of spiritual truth to sustain a forward movement and reign justice on such an endeavor.

> I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right. That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right I can conceive, but here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable.[193]

The task then moves to attempting to create an artistic pride in the Negro past. This too is directed mostly to the Negro youth. He urges them to conceive of a new way of seeing the past and to (re)create it to be used as an inspiration for a new future.

> There has come to us . . . a realization of that past, of which for long years we have been ashamed, for which we have apologized. We thought nothing could come out of that past which we wanted to remember; which we wanted to hand down to our children. Suddenly, this same past is taking on form, color, and reality, and in a half-shamefaced way we are beginning to be proud of it. We are remembering that the romance of the world did not die and lie forgotten in the Middle Ages; that if you want romance to deal with you must have it here and now and in your hands.[194]

He tells a story to illustrate the dramatic intrigue and potential for tragic drama in the everyday lives of

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[193] DuBois, "Criteria" in Reader by Weingerg, 253-254.

[194] DuBois, "Criteria" in Reader by Weingerg, 254.

Negroes. He compares this potential to that of the ancient Greek tragedies. He states that there are historical events involving Negroes that have never been told to the public of America and will possibly never be told, unless some Negro person does the telling.

> Such is the true and stirring stuff of which Romance is born and from this stuff come the stirrings of men who are beginning to remember that this kind of material is theirs; and this vital life of their own kind is beckoning them on. . . . The question comes next as to the interpretation of these new stirrings, of this new spirit. Of what is the colored artist capable? [195]

The Romance of which he speaks must be interpreted as the dramatic style of epic adventure, still popular in the theatre. The statement "that this material is theirs" reminds his audience that such dramatic stories are very much a part of Negro heritage and worthy of exposure. To this notion DuBois imposes a vital question:

> Suppose the only Negro who survived some centuries hence was the Negro painted by white Americans in the novels and essays they have written. What would people in a hundred years say of black Americans? Now turn it around. Suppose you were to write a story and put in it the kind of people you know and like and imagine.[196]

The implications of this question are clear. It is a challenge to the race. It says to everyone, but particularly the youth, that the future of the Negro image

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[195] DuBois, "Criteria" in Reader by Weingerg, 255.

[196] DuBois, "Criteria" in Reader by Weingerg, 257.

is the responsibility of the Negro him/herself. Thus, he challenges the race to begin the work of creating beauty, as it is conceive and understood from the race's own perspective.

DuBois clearly understood that arts, and especially the theatre, was a device by which White America had constructed an image of the Negro to its liking and purpose. He made this awareness clear in his 1924 "The Negro and the American Stage." Now in "Criteria of Negro Art," he proposes a reversal of image and ideology through the urging of the (re)creation of Negro image from within the race. He outlines a procedure for this purpose:

> Thus, it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, and we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before. And what have been the tools of the artist in times gone by? First of all, he has used the Truth . . . Again artists have used Goodness - goodness in all its aspects of justice, honor and right . . . The apostle of Beauty thus becomes the apostle of Truth and Right not by choice but by inner and outer compulsion. Free he is but his freedom is ever bounded by Truth and Justice; and slavery only dogs him when he is denied the right to tell the Truth or recognize an ideal of Justice.[197]

And now with clear purpose and justification, DuBois makes his prophetically pragmatic statement concerning the Negro art as propaganda. It is an honest, truthful and right

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[197] DuBois, "Criteria" in Reader by Weingerg, 258.

declaration that took years of insightful introspection to conclude. He states:

> Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. 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 . . . 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.[198]

It was justifiable and right, that the artistic medium by which Negroes were taught to consider themselves inferior, bufoonish, ugly and only worthy of the scraps of America should now be used to (re)gain a positive sense of self. The artistic means which had been used as a propaganda device against a race should now be used to uplift that same race. This was DuBois's urging. The potential of such a move was clear. The fact that certain White playwrights saw the exciting potential inherent in the lived experiences and soulful urges of the Black race was made real by the successes of several such writers. Suppressed by the White world which would not allow them the opportunity to write about degradation and pity, O'Neill, Torrance, DuBose Heyward and others turned to

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[198] DuBois, "Criteria" in Reader by Weingerg, 258.

Negro themes and used Black characters as objects of their desires to express emotional power. DuBois explained:

> the white public today demands from its artists, literary and pictorial, racial prejudgment which deliberately distorts Truth and Justice, as far as colored races are concerned, and it will pay for no other. . . . We must come to the place where the work of art when it appears is reviewed and acclaimed by our own free and unfettered judgment. And we are going to have a real and valuable and eternal judgment only as we make ourselves free of mind, proud of body, and just of soul to all men.[199]

In "Criteria for Negro Art" DuBois gave to Black American artists of all kinds a ground on which to stand and a light to illuminate their creative spirits. His essay on Negro art is a statement of profound aestheticism which provides this writer with four important points about the needs and purpose of Negro art: 1.) An understandable devotion to and pursuit of the beautiful; sensitivity to artistic beauty and refined taste. 2.) A doctrine that beauty is the basic principle from which all other principles, especially moral ones, are derived. 3.) The belief that art and artists have no obligation other than to strive for beauty. 4.) An understanding or acceptance of a philosophy that beauty of the spirit is the means to truth and righteousness and the foundation for just living.

DuBois's "Criteria for Negro Art" is a fully realized development of his ideas as first presented in 1903. In

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[199] DuBois, "Criteria" in Reader by Weingerg, 259.

the twenty-three years that passed from his early statements on the potentials of the artistic souls of Negroes in The Souls of Black Folk, his perspectives grew in relation to the theatrical presentations of Negro life he witnessed. His "Critera" acknowledges both what had been done and what was left to be done toward the fill realization of his vision to utilize the arts as a means of lifting-up the Negro race. The impact of this historical formation and foundation for African-American dramatic theory will be analyzed in the following chapters which focus on the work that was inspired by these pioneering philosophical ideas.

Chapter 4

FROM THEORY TO STAGE: THE DEVELOPMENTAL YEARS FROM THE 1920s TO 1950

The Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s provided the beginnings of a theoretical frame for the development of theatre by, for and about African-Americans. Following the 1925 publication of The New Negro, edited by Alain Locke, and W. E. B. DuBois's address to the Chicago convention of the NAACP ("Criteria for Negro Art") attention was well focused on the potential for an American Negro Theatre. However, it would be a while before such a theatre would become a reality.

In January of 1927, an unsigned article appeared in Opportunity magazine with the title, "On the Need for Better Plays."[200] Opportunity, subtitled the "Journal of Negro Life," was published by the National Urban League

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[200] "On the Need for Better Plays" Unsigned article in Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life, January, 1927, 5-6. Reprinted in The Critics and the Harlem Renaissance, ed., Cary D. Wintz, New York: Garland Publishing, 1996, 49-50.

under the editorship of one of the "midwives of the New Negro Movement," Charles S. Johnson. Along with the NAACP publication, The Crisis, edited by DuBois, Opportunity was a leader in the effort to develop Negro writers during the 1920s. Like The Crisis, Opportunity also operated and supported a literary contest as a means of developing the writing talents of the New Negro community. But in "On the Need for Better Plays," an alarming reality was revealed. The article states:

> The Drama Section of the last two OPPORTUNITY Contests, while contributing new material, and a few good one act plays for the Negro Theatre, seems yet farthest behind the possibilities of its field of all the literary divisions.[201]

Negro writers of poetry, short stories and novels of fiction, and essays all made great strides while taking advantage of the serious opportunities and prizes presented by The Crisis and Opportunity magazines. This was not the case with playwrights. The point made by this article was all the more serious because of the contrast presented; that plays of Negro life were being written by White writers while Negro playwrights were "limited for the most part to low comedy which has succeeded commercially, and to a few propagandistic efforts of a defensive character."[202] "On the Need for Better Plays," charged that:

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[201] "Need for Better Plays," 49.

[202] "Need for Better Plays," 49.

> Negro writers have not, until very recently, sensed the possibilities of Negro drama. They have, excusably, used the drama as a field for the development of histrionic talent within the race and have led themselves off into palpably unreal portrayals of the general plays of the stock company repertoire. They have been too ashamed of the material of their own lives to give it artistic portrayal.[203]

This statement indicates that most of the plays presented by Negro writers appeared to be simple imitations of plays from the White commercial stage. What the writer of this article attempts to do is stir new thoughts and interests in writing for the stage. The article contends:

> Herein lies the great future of the Negro in drama. It can provide a medium for the forceful interpretation of Negro life itself, a service which the stage undoubtedly can perform with as great, if not greater, directness and power than either fiction or poetry.[204]

This article also acknowledges a need and potential "for plays suitable for mixed casts, or plays that will offer aid toward softening the harsh points of racial contact." It announces requests to the magazine for such plays, particularly from "the International Student Forum in England, and the Negro-Caucasian Club at the University of Michigan." Then the writer states: "This suggests still a further possibility for our developing playwrights." The article ends with an identification of what it contends to

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[203] "Need for Better Plays," 50.

[204] "Need for Better Plays," 50.

be the major problem associated with the lack of plays by Negro playwrights:

> There has not been sufficient study of technique by the Negro playwrights. It is evident that the greatest lack at present is in the technique of play construction. . . . There is not only opportunity for Negroes in drama but, at this stage, abundant hope; and we look to the materials of the present contest to point a way to definite accomplishment.[205]

Thus, the problem of training and training institutions for Negro theatre artists is brought once again to the forefront as an important issue to be dealt with.

By October 1930, the situation had made no obvious gains when an article by Randolph Edmonds appeared. Edmonds, in "Some Reflections on the Negro in American Drama,"[206] states what must have been a concern for many with interests in the development toward an American Negro Theatre. The opening paragraph of his article reads:

> There is drama in Negro life. The truth of this statement is seldom contested, for everyone who knows intimately the complex existence of colored America, and is in any degree capable of analyzing the subtle soil upon which the art of the theatre grows, recognized that fact, and is usually not hesitant about saying so. It is very evident that suffering, struggle, comedy, atmosphere, and great emotional crises - the very essence of the dramatic - are found abundantly in Negro life. Since this is true, the average observer has been puzzled at the low progress made by the Negro in the dramatic art.

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[205] "Need for Better Plays," 50.

[206] Randolph Edmonds, "Some Reflections on the Negro in American Drama," Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life, October, 1930, 303-305.

> He becomes still more mystified when he compares the advancement made in this field with that evidenced in poetry, music, the novel and the essay. The conclusion is almost inescapable that the so called "Negro Renaissance" has been almost a total failure in so far as the development of the drama is concerned.[207]

Edmonds gives answer to the question, "why has there been so little development in Negro theatre and Negro playwrights," by explaining the developmental requirements for playwrights:

> The verdict of history decrees a long and arduous apprenticeship both in tradition and accomplishment for marked success in the art of the theatre. Then, too, its offerings are designed to appeal to a heterogeneous crowd which brings to the playhouse all kinds of opinions and prejudices which a playwright opposes at a great risk. . . . Until comparatively recent times, the narrow opinion of this "compact majority" decreed that serious drama was no fit vehicle for the Negro actor. The buffoon, farce comedians, and the clown who could sing blues, spirituals, and clog dance were the roles assigned to him with the minstrel show as the vehicle.[208]

This lack of theatrical tradition was spoken of earlier by Locke, who acknowledged the Negro's "temperament" for drama as an outweighing element of potential. Edmonds also illuminates the continued power of the minstrel past as an almost paralyzing historical part of the Negro's attempts at creating a serious self designated theatrical image.

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[207] Edmonds, 303.

[208] Edmonds, 304.

Edmonds continues his article with a survey and discussion of plays with Negro characters from about 1917 to 1930, noting; "the great tragedy is that playwrights of color have had so little influence in shaping these plays."[209] He points out that the plays and the subject matters of the plays tended, for the most part, to present:

> dark portrayals of human misery silhouetted against a black sky-line of woes. They reveal earthly suffering at its blackest - men and women with skins of night struggling in the anguish and agony of situations that doom them to failure and despair from the very opening of the curtain. . . . no wonder the average Negro is sceptical [sic] about plays that purport to reveal an authentic picture of his life.[210]

The descriptive writing is pained and almost depressive. Yet, Edmonds was not simply bemoaning the situation without thought and purposeful point. He continues:

> I do not contend that the tragic side of life should not be depicted. My point is that it should be grounded in the natural laws of life, and tragedy should come as a result of the fitness or unfitness of a character to perform a task. This piling up of insurmountable obstacles with their overtones of inferiority is very unsatisfactory to those who see something deeper and finer and more dramatic in Negro life, and envisage in it a real contribution to the American theatre.[211]

From this point, Edmonds discusses what he calls the "notable exception" to the plays of Negro life as written

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[209] Edmonds, 304.

[210] Edmonds, 304.

[211] Edmonds, 304.

by "Nordic" playwrights, The Green Pastures by Marc Connelly. About Connelly's play he notes:

> Somehow the spiritual message forces its way through the comedy, music, setting and the violent contrasts of its episodes. There comes a feeling, even among the harshest critics, that here is something beautiful and powerful acted by Negroes and told in Negro dialect, and of which they need not be ashamed.[212]

Edmonds acknowledges the concerns that many Negroes had for Connelly's portrayal of God as a Black man, and a host of Negro angels singing spirituals at a heavenly fish-fry. But Edmonds was not alone in praising the difference in this play from others objectifying Negro life and character. DuBois explained a bit of the particularly surprising dimension of Connelly's play when he wrote:

> "The Green Pastures" has helped our hope, and it has helped not so much in form and word and authorship as in the deft and subtle marvel of its interpretation. For skillful as the written play may be, the secret of its triumph lies in its interpretation by Negro actors. . . . no human soul witnessing a performance can doubt the lure of its human kindliness and the mighty tragedy beneath the deep and reverent guidance of a great actor.[213]

What both Edmonds and DuBois apparently saw in Connelly's play was the kind of opportunity for Negro actors and the

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[212] Edmonds, 304.

[213] DuBois, "Beside the Still Waters," in The Crisis 38, May 1931, 168-169. The article is publication of a speech made by DuBois a the bestowing of the 17th Spingarn Medal to Richard B. Harrison, who played the role of God in The Green Pastures by Marc Connelly. The speech was presented at the Mansfield Theatre in New York where the play was beginning its second year's run.

portrayal of Negro people that they hoped for in plays by Negro writers. They acknowledged that Connelly's play provided roles which allowed for fuller expressiveness of the Negro actor. Edmonds explained:

> One would naturally expect Negro plays by Negro authors to reveal the soul of the black man, to give us something of the beauty and grandeur contained in "The Green Pastures" but unfortunately this is not so. . . . Very little originality is manifested, and certainly there is no more piercing insight into the depth of Negro life indicated. Still further there is no catching the joyful and poetic side of life beyond the color line, no subtle suggestion of tragedy that rises in ominous overtones from black philosophy. Negro drama, as written by Negroes, is too stilted, too restrained, directly imitative of white authors, and as a rule inferior in craftsmanship with long literary speeches and almost no theatric values.[214]

Edmonds speaks of the continuing problem that plagued the development of Negro plays and playwrights; that being, a lack of training and understanding of dramatic form, structure and originality of insight and perspective. Then he goes on to make a serious observation followed by a most important question:

> strictly speaking there is no such thing as Negro drama, Irish drama, French drama, and the like. Drama is a representation of universal life built around the feelings, thoughts, and clash of wills of particular people. When we speak of the drama of a nationality, we mean these universal truths colored by the temperament of a group. And certainly the reaction of Negroes to life should give us something that is distinctively different. . .

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[214] Edmonds, 304-305.

> . Now what is the best way of helping young colored authors to write the drama of their race?[215]

The most important question of all had finally been asked, out loud. "What is the best way to help a dismal situation?" Edmonds answered this question by explaining a need for the creation and development of Negro university theatre training programs with particular concrn for developing Negro playwights. He spoke of efforts at such institutions as Howard University, Morgan College and Hampton Institute, none of which managed to consistently develop a full range of Negro theatre artists, particularly playwrights for a Negro Theatre.

A lack in the development of capable Negro playwrights of numbers and merit led the theatrical editor of the New York Afro-American, Ralph Matthews, to surmise that no such thing existed as a Negro Theatre. Matthews wrote an article for a 1934 publication entitled "The Negro Theater - A Dodo Bird."[216] He explains:

> A famous explorer returning form Africa once had much to tell about the Dodo Bird, an extinct fowl which, it was later revealed, did not exist at all. When one sets out to write about the Negro Theatre, he feels almost as guilty as the

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[215] Edmonds, 305.

[216] Ralph Matthews. "The Negro Theater-A Dodo Bird," in Negro: Anthology Made By Nancy Cunard 1931-1933, ed. by Nancy Cunard, London: Wishart & Co. 1934. Reprinted as Negro: An Anthology, New York: Frederick Unger 1970, 194-196. Article also appears in The Critics and the Harlem Renaissance, ed. by Cary D. Wintz, New York: Garland, 1996, 312-314.

> hapless explore after the exposé. The Negro Theatre, as such is a Dodo Bird.[217]

Then Matthews attempts to explain his paradoxical statement:

> Because the American theatre is a commercialized industry instead of a medium merely for the expression of art for art's sake, the Negroes who have entered this field since emancipation have not been so much concerned with developing a vital, moving force depicting the soul of an oppressed people as they were with merely eking out an existence. Their paramount concern was, what side of the Negro can we sell?[218]

Matthews quotes from an "eminent psycho-analyst" who suggested, "Everybody likes to laugh at a black man." Matthews recounts the same story, which by now had become a common and familiar tune; of the imago,[219] or the history of the minstrel impression on the American psyche. He points out that even the titles of early Negro shows such as Mr. Lode of Cole, A Trip to Coontown, Darktown Follies, Blackbirds and Hot Chocolates all carried negative implications. Matthews saw that after a period of about thirty years since the beginnings of Negro performer's

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[217] Matthews, 194.

[218] Matthews, 194.

[219] The imago is an unconscious figure or stereotype that forms the basis for relationships. Although imagoes are originally based on figures in the family environment, they are not reflections of real individuals so much as fantasy representations. The term imago has required currency among psychoanalytic critics largely as a result of its use by Jacques Lacan in his influential essay on the Mirror State, which demonstrates the significance of the imago of the young child's own body in his or her experiential world. Childers and Hentzi, 152.

attempts to make substantial contributions in theatre, very little departure from the role of the buffoon and the clown had been possible. His distress is clear as he writes:

> The work of pioneer sepia showman was pretty well circumscribed. America accepted him only in the form that exploited his inherent abilities. Thus the musical comedy field, that gave him opportunity for singing and dancing, talents that are attributed to the black man as a racial heritage, flourished; while the drama, which required application, study and artificial development, could not get a foothold until after the late war. Even this, when presented in its most pretentious forms, could not conscientiously be classed as Negro theatre, because the productions for the most part are from the pens of white playwrights. Through their productions seeps an unconscious strain of Ofay psychology that presents the Negro not as he sees himself, but as he is seen through the condescending eyes of the detached observer. Thus only the extremities of Negro life have been brought on to the stage.[220]

This passage helps to illustrate the impact of appropriation, no matter how subtle, on the deeper psychology of the American mind set. Matthews declares that the Negro's contributions to American theatre has been his humor, and he classifies these contributions into three divisions;

> the droll, "po' me" type,. . . in which the poor black-faced comedian becomes the butt of adversity . . . the slicker type of character . . . in which one Negro is able to take advantage of his more ignorant brethren. . . . The third classification finds its humor built on suggestiveness that is quite frankly termed smut. . . . The latter type of humor flourished most in the houses catering exclusively to a

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[220] Matthews, 194.

> colored clientèle . . . when colored actors in Metropolitan houses were few.[221]

Matthews made a contention that the new type of Negro entertainments popular with the White American public had now changed its image somewhat, but essentially served the same purposes as the minstrel tradition; primarily to entertain White America. He complained that a form of Negro humor for Negro audiences, which he calls smut, adds to a subliminal degradation of the race deepening a personal psychological sense of racial depravation.

He then speaks of the Harlem nightclub craze which had also become popular in the 1920s. He states:

> the basic principles upon which America has always accepted the Negro still remain. . . . The old musical comedy scenes which showed him in overalls against a background depicting a Mississippi levee have given way to a night club panorama, and Harlem has supplanted Dixie as the name synonymous with Negro. . . . The plunking banjo and the cotton-field chant have been supplanted by the moaning saxophone and the rent-party wail. The melancholy spirituals have been replaced by the equally melancholy but less reverent blues, and the rhythm of the old plantation has vanished in the path of the weird and sensuous tempo of the jungle and the transplanted beat of the tom-tom.[222]

Here Matthews is making another point concerning the lack of development by Negroes in the legitimate American Theatre. Rather, the Harlem nightclub scene had become the new haven of Negro musical delights, not far removed from

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[221] Matthews, 194-195.

[222] Matthews, 195.

the plight and purpose of minstrelsy. Matthews's concerns are all the more sorrowful because he highlights even further the potentials of Negro stage artists who are yet not free to express themselves in a serious manner as might be expected of them as writers and interpreters of plays about Negro life and experience. Still he makes clear his respect for Negro artists who pioneered a way for someone yet unnamed to follow:

> I have nothing but praise for these gladiators who invaded the benighted Southland, playing in stuffy theatres, travelling in discomfort, sleeping and eating in places unfit for decent habitation. Snubbed and ignored by the better citizenry, they carried on, lifting their calling by their own bootstraps until the proper recognition could be attained.[223]

He closes his article with a resounding note of paradoxical truth as he speaks about the Negro artist's hopes of making it on the Broadway stage:

> Harlem is now the mecca of the Negro theatre and Broadway is its goal. This means assimilation. A merger of talents has taken and continues to take place with the increasing years. Both groups have profited by the pooling of their respective interests and contributions. The American theatre moves on to a finer, more cosmopolitan and higher pinnacle by virtue of these changes. The Negro theatre is a Dodo Bird.[224]

Matthews expresses what many did not want to justify by saying, that an American Negro theatre did not exist in

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[223] Matthews, 196.

[224] Matthews, 196.

actuality. All attempts at sustaining such a theatre were met with troublesome problems, mostly stemming from the reality that not enough Negro artists had been seriously trained to support a national on-going theatre movement focused on Negro life and culture. But time and circumstance would soon deliver a situation that would prove to be of major importance and a literal launching pad for the creation and development of theatre by Negroes. And, it might be argued that the source of such a major and massive undertaking came from the one institution that actually "owed" the Negro race an opportunity as a "hand up" onto the platform of the American cultural scene; the federal government.

In 1935 "the federal government surfaced . . . with the most ambitious theatre program ever attempted - an undertaking which proved to be one of the most seminal developments in black theatre history."[225] It was called The Federal Theater Project (FTP) and was an early part of the Franklin D. Roosevelt New Deal programs administrated by the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

The WPA of the Roosevelt administration was an ambitious attempt to combat the conditions created by the stock market collapse of 1929, causing what came to be

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[225] Ronald Ross, "The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939," in The Theatre of Black Americans, ed. by Errol Hill, New York: Appplause 1980 & 1987, 231-246.

known as the great American economic Depression. The FTP was designed to create work and pay for the many displaced theatrical workers affected by the depression. But it did much more on a sociologic level to actualize opportunities for Negro artists had been talked about for years. E. Quita Craig explains :

> There were serious plays about the black experience in American written by black playwrights in the early years of the twentieth century . . . However, before the New Deal's Great Experiment was launched in 1935, few of those plays ever reached the footlights. . . . "It was the Federal Theatre," said black Federal playwright Theodore Ward," that proved the open Sesame, providing at once a laboratory and the wherewithal for creative enterprise." In fact, in no area of its endeavors did the Federal Theatre's efforts and influence reap more dividends than in that of black drama. For many young black dramatists, this was their first opportunity to concentrate on their creative efforts, free from the devastating effects of economic pressure, and to participate in stage procedures and production techniques on such a broad scale.[226]

The results of the involvement of Negro playwrights in the FTP was made richer by the feedback they received from having their plays produced. This valuable form of instruction was to be instrumental in the development of such writers for years to follow the project. Craig's

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[226] E. Quita Craig, Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era: Beyond the Formal Horizons, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1980, 8-9. Theodore Ward is quoted from, Sterling A. Brown, "The Federal Theater," in The Anthology of the American Negro in the Theater, ed. Lindsay Patterson, Myrdal Carnegie Study 1940 (New York: The Publishers Co., 1967), 107.

analysis of the dramas of Negro playwrights of the FTP also revealed, according to James Hatch:

> the black writers of the FTP were not the isolated, culturally crippled amateurs she had been led to believe they were. Instead these playwrights stood out as shrewd, talented artists who had negotiated impossible dreams into possible productions. They had worked in a difficult time and place: faced with a segregated theater, and the racism of its audiences, they had cunningly worked into their dramas "dual messages" - one to be perceived by whites, the other by blacks. . . . Ms. Craig was able to discern how these black writers used the European modes of viewing the world to speak through their plays to the Caucasian audience and, at the same time, how they were able to present the African aesthetic and philosophy to a second audience of Afro-Americans.[227]

The reflection of DuBoisian "double consciousness" is connected to this 1930s movement in a real way by these statements. What Hatch identifies is a mode which was already utilized by Negro dramatists which was developed and enriched by the opportunities of the FTP playwrights unit.

The FTP was conceived and constructed in a way that challenged commercial theatrical traditions by making theatre available and accessible to the masses of America for the first time. It was a true national theatre movement with particular interests in every part of American culture and cultural groups. Ronald Ross in "The

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[227] James V. Hatch, Introduction to Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era: Beyond the Formal Horizons, by E. Quita Craig, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1980, vii.

Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939," explains:

> Within the sprawling framework of its national program, the Federal Theatre established special ethnic theatre projects so that these groups would be able to do plays of their own literatures. The French theatre in Los Angeles; the German theatre in New York City; the Italian theatre in Massachusetts, New York City and Los Angeles; and the Negro theatre in several cities were among the specially designed units.[228]

These special units proved to be an opportunity not only for the training and development of Negro artists, but also a socializing institution for the development of Negro audiences, and for the development of White American understanding and acceptance of a united and unified way of thinking and seeing social potentials. Ross details the FTP situation in the following passage:

> Aside from being favored with their own production units because the project's national leadership was determined to contribute to the development of black theatre, blacks also shared fully in other project activities. Not only did they participate in the dramatic productions staged by the non-ethnic units, but they were an integral part of such diverse theatre operations as workshops for playwrights and technical craftsmen, research bureau services to communities, and project publications which included the *Federal Theatre Magazine*.[229]

Thus, Negroes were thrust into the entire operational system of American Theatre. They were allowed to learn by participating and the entire FTP system became an opening

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[228] Ross, 234.

[229] Ross, 234.

of the future for African-American Theatre. By the time the project was closed by Act of Congress in 1939, some twenty-two American cities had Negro theatre units, all providing training for artists, exposure for audiences, and as Ross points out:

> this government theatre had an opportunity to accomplish something that it never should have had to attempt in the first place - to dramatize to white America that essential humanity of its black citizenry. Although it is highly unlikely that this objective was realized, the great amount of favorable publicity attending the work done by blacks throughout the project did reflect the general public's acceptance of these minority members as worthy contributors to the cultural life of the nation.[230]

Certainly, one of the greatest and long lasting contributions of the FTP to the development of Negro theatre was the training and development of Negro playwrights. The creation of the Negro Dramatists' Laboratory was a concentrated effort for this purpose. Possibly for the first time Negro writers were schooled in such technical aspects of writing for the stage that included form, structure, research techniques, technical requirements, copyright laws and thematic construction and development. At the same time, according to Ross:

> the project's social-minded perspective conditioned audiences into being more receptive to the problem play which explored contemporary conditions, a development previously discouraged

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[230] Ross, 236.

> by the Broadway-dominated commercial theatres because of box-office concerns.[231]

With the training of playwrights, directors, performers, designers and technicians, administrators and audiences, all as a result of the FTP, not only American Negroes but all of America was prepared for a national theatre movement as never before seen in the history of the United States.

Yet, The United States Congress, following the recommendations of the Special House Committee on Un-American Activities as headed by Chairman Martin Dies of Texas, put an end to the entire program in 1939. Lofton Mitchell suggests:

> By killing the Federal Theatre, powerful American forces took the drama away from the masses and lodged it firmly in the bosom of the aristocratic and middle-class groups. That the Federal theatre offered employment, experience and training to may . . . theatre artists is obvious. That it offered exciting low-cost theatre to large segments of the population is undeniable. That all this was taken away from the people is one of the great tragedies of the American theatre.[232]

But regardless of the governmental reasons for eliminating the project, results of the effort are best summarized by Ross:

> Having previously been assigned an inferior position in the American theatre, blacks subsequently took full advantage of their first extended opportunity in the professional theatre. In the process, they demonstrated

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[231] Ross, 245.

[232] Mitchell, 103.

> conclusively that playwriting, directing, stage designing, and serious acting were well within their province - all they had ever needed was the chance that the Federal Theatre Project provided them.[233]

The FTP was essentially a government welfare program. And, albeit that the work created by the program in all probability was at least equal to and arguably greatly superior to that of the commercial Broadway productions of the times, in reality it was a lack of self sustainability that helped cause its demise. On the other hand, the commercial Broadway arena remained the hallmark symbol of credibility in the field of theatre and Negro intellectuals appeared not to be happy until success for Negro artists was achieved there.

In 1941, Alain Locke published another attack on the lack of promotion of Negro theatre and Negro artists by Broadway producers. In "Broadway and the Negro Drama"[234] he wrote:

> There could be no more convincing indication of the vital place of the drama of Negro life in contemporary American drama than the impressive succession in the last twenty years of plays like *The Emperor Jones, Roseanne, All God's Chillun Got Wings, In Abraham's Bosom, Porgy, Run Little Chillun, The Green Pastures, Stevedore, Porgy and Bess, Mulatto, Mamba's Daughters,* and in 1941 - *Cabin in the Sky* and

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[233] Ross, 246.

[234] Locke, "Broadway and the Negro Drama," in The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture, ed. by Jeffrey C. Stewart, New York: Garland 1983, 93-98. Originally printed in Theatre Arts 25, No. 10 (October 1941), 745-750.

> *Native Son.* These highlights of the Broadway record are a substantial contribution to our best native drama, and, as such, they stand to Broadway's everlasting credit. But along with a consideration of what Broadway has done must go some critical consideration of what has not, as yet, been done. . . . Broadway has not built up as yet what is most essential for Negro drama - a plateau of sustained use and support of those Negro materials, human and dramatic, which, from time to time, it has so significantly revealed and so successfully exploited.[235]

Several of the aforementioned plays have been mentioned before in the development toward a Negro Theatre. A few were products of the FTP. But this article is clearly a diatribe on the shortsightedness of Broadway producers, unwilling for whatever reasons to put forth works by and about Negro people and to utilize the serious talents of Negro artists.

> Sporadic support and intermittent interest have thus wrought havoc with many of the best possibilities.. Good, even great actors have gone to seed, and forward looking precedents have closed in again as timorous lapses have followed some of the boldest innovations. With the courage of its own successes, Broadway could have extended at least a half dozen of the above plays into a sustained tradition of original and typically American drama.[236]

But how does Locke expect this kind of development of Negro theatre to come from White producers? Surely he is not suggesting that such persons as producers with their eyes set only on the potential dollars that success in the

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[235] Locke, "Broadway," 93.

[236] Locke, "Broadway," 93.

American capitalist arena of Broadway might bring would or even could be the saviors of Negro interests in cultural material which they knew little of and cared even less about. But Locke did seem to realize this odd situation when he wrote:

> The rarer possibilities of Negro drama will never be revealed by the 'big producers' searchlight hunting in the fixed direction of his past successes or in the arbitrary focus of what he thinks the public wants. Nor will his production methods ever unfold the characteristic talents of the Negro singer, dancer or actor; indeed in too many cases already has this routine treatment taken the spontaneity, vitality and true folkiness [sic] out of our Negro artists and left a bizarre hybrid in its place.[237]

It is the notion of White producers' and directors' inability or unwillingness to allow for the full expression of Negro actors and their acting style to have free rein that is also a focus of Locke's concern in this article. He even suggests that these same producers have sometimes lost money on theatrical failures "due mainly to this short-sighted insistence on acting stereotypes and dramatic clichés" that they prefer to force Negro actors into.[238]

Locke specifically addresses certain Negro actors, with considerable renown for their abilities, who have been failures in productions due to poor or untrusting guidance from White directors. He also compliments another group of

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[237] Locke, "Broadway," 94.

[238] Locke, "Broadway," 94.

directors with the ability to guide Negro actors in the release of "latent dramatic power by sympathetic and non-routine direction such as that of James Light, Jasper Deeter, Rouben Mamoulian, Marc Connelly, John Houseman, Orson Welles - to mention the outstanding few."[239] He seems to be most upset about the lack of recognition and opportunities for certain Negro artists with considerable "star" qualities who received not enough of a chance to expose their talents.

> The crippling vogue of the stock formulas has even invaded the Negro vaudeville circuits, and less and less of what is novel and spontaneous is to be seen even there. . . . As to the legitimate stage, it is simply Broadway's loss that the best Negro talent comes so sporadically, and often so tragically late, to its wider, more discriminating audiences.[240]

Locke names several such actors in this category of the seldom featured; among them are: Charles Gilpin, Evelyn Ellis, Rose McClendon, Leigh Whipper, Richard Harrison, Rex Ingram, Canada Lee, Katherine Dunham, Ethel Waters, Dooley Wilson, Georgette Harvey and the great Paul Robeson. He provides good advice when he suggests that Broadway look to a group of "Harlem amateurs" for insight. He writes:

> for a newly developing field of drama, with its inevitable novelties of theme and talents, orthodox and conventional notions are the least profitable of all possible procedures, and the results are bound to be meagre. Many if not

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[239] Locke, "Broadway," 95.

[240] Locke, "Broadway," 96.

> most of these Negro successes, . . . were taken over from the more flexible experimentalism and hardier social courage of the tributary theatre. . . . Indeed, Broadway would do well to look still more closely, if only for hints and cures, at the materials available in the Negro Little Theatre repertory and its acting groups. [241]

Such a potentially inspiring place to look for "hints and cures" was already under way uptown in Harlem. As in the 1920s with the excitement of Negro musical theatre, now the focus would become the Negro dramas of modern realism and the American Negro Theatre would be that place to look.

The closing of the FTP in 1939 presented a new need for Negro artists. Without the outstretched arms of Broadway awaiting, they would have to fend for themselves toward the establishment of a theatre that was truly their own. This did come with the formation of a long dreamed of American Negro Theatre (A.N.T.) in Harlem in 1940. The A.N.T. was pulled together by two men who had been part of the FTP, Abram Hill and Frederick O'Neal. Ethel Pitts Walker, in "The American Negro Theatre,"[242] reports the founding date of the organization as June 11, 1940. She writes:

> When the Federal Theatre Project of the Works Progress Administration ended in 1939, Black theatre artists who had been employed in Negro units across the country were thrown back on

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[241] Locke, "Broadway," 94.

[242] Ethel Pitts Walker, "The American Negro Theatre," in The Theatre of Black Americans, ed. by Errol Hill, New York: Appplause 1980 & 1987, 247-260.

> their own resources. Hill and O'Neal felt that what was needed was a community-based theatre, a theatre not dominated by the actor but one where directors, writers, technicians and actors were equally important and where there would be a training program for young theatre artists. They set out to establish such an institution in Harlem.[243]

According to Walker, the company began with eighteen members and increased quickly to a charter group of about thirty. The general philosophy of the group was obviously influenced by the association of most of its members with the earlier FTP. This segment from Walker supports such a notion:

> The founders of A.N.T. hoped "to break down the barriers of Black participation in the theatre; to portray Negro life as they honestly saw it; to fill in the gap of a Black theatre which did not exist." Although the theatre was formed initially to reflect the Harlem community, it was never a segregated organization. A.N.T. member Claire Leyba explained that the company never became concerned about Black and White since they hired White teachers and accepted White actors and technicians. Nevertheless, the idea of a theatre in Harlem for Black people was central to the conception of A.N.T.[244]

This ideology of openness to all, Black and White workers who wanted to be a part of "something beautiful," was also a throwback to the concepts of DuBois and the founding of the Krigwa Players in Harlem during the 1920s. In fact, A.N.T. utilized the actual performing space in the basement of the 135th Street Library in Harlem that had also housed

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[243] Walker, 247.

[244] Walker, 251.

the Krigwa Players as well as Langston Hughes's Harlem Suitcase Theatre and the Rose McClendon Players. All of these groups had short lives following the FTP. A.N.T. would be the one to survive long enough to have historical impact.

The name of the group provided another DuBoisian concept of "group identity" and the acronym of A.N.T. helped present a constant reminder of the membership pledge "to be like ants, real workers." Walker explains:

> The company was an incorporated cooperative with all members sharing expenses or profits. . . . Despite the lack of funding, the company raised enough money to finance its productions, trained over 200 people and attracted some fifty thousand patrons to witness 325 performances.[245]

The objectives by which A.N.T. activities were to be measured were created in 1944 when the company applied for a support grant from the General Education Board of the Rockefeller Foundation. The objectives were:

> 1. *To Develop an Art.* A permanent acting company (coordinating) and perfecting the related arts of the theatre; eventually deriving its own theatre craft and acting style by combining all standard forms and putting to artful use the fluency and rhythm that lie in the Negro's special gifts.
> 2. *To Develop a Vital Theatre.* Calling for plays which furnish commentary, interpretation, illumination and criticism of our common lives during contemporary times, located in the Harlem section of New York City, with its theatre, workshop and school affiliated with Negro theatre groups throughout the country, and acting as a parent body to such affiliates.

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[245] Walker, 252.

> 3. *To Develop Pride and Honor.* For a theatre which for too long has been unstudied and exploited; by being honest, yet unflattering, by being perfectionists rather than professionals, and winning the pride of the people rather than their apathy.[246]

These objectives were printed on all A.N.T. production programs that followed this date.

The company was unique in the historical development of an American Negro theatre for many reasons. Among those reasons was the understanding of a need for continued training of young artists. The programs of A.N.T. were divided into three areas: stage production, training workshops including a school of drama; and radio shows.[247] The training school offered courses in acting, movement, voice and speech, stagecraft, choral singing, play writing and radio. The overall aim was "to develop 'completely-rounded' actors, knowledgeable and trained in every aspect of the theatre."[248] A regular radio series began in 1945. It was a Sunday afternoon program called "New World A-Coming," which ran on New York radio station WNEW, with an aim to promote the universality of scripts, characters and

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[246] Walker, 252. Taken from Abram Hill, proposal submitted to the General Education Board of the Rockefeller Foundation, New York, N.Y., February 25, 1944.

[247] Walker, 253.

[248] Walker, 257.

performing talent.[249] Maybe the greatest problem for this successful Negro theatre company was indeed its success.

> From 1940 to 1949 the company produced nineteen plays, twelve of which were original scripts. According to Hill, four of their productions transferred from A.N.T. to the commercial theatre. These were *On Striver's Row, Anna Lucasta, Walk Hard,* and *Freight.* The willingness of the company to experiment in the production of original scripts established it as a unique theatre in New York.[250]

The successful transfer of productions to the commercial Broadway stage created considerable trouble at the Harlem home base of the company. Many new applicants came primarily seeing entrance into the Broadway arena. Conflicts between actors and playwrights developed concerning which interest were to be served. Financial difficulties emerged when the Rockefeller Foundation grant expired at the end of 1947. Walker also reports that after 1945, all plays produced by the company were by White writers, albeit that the plays mostly dealt with Negro life.

By 1950 the A.N.T. company found itself in a creative and financial slump from which it could not recover. The American Negro Theatre of Harlem which had brought so much excitement and hope closed. However, in the ten years or so of its existence the A.N.T. provided realization of a

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[249] Walker, 257.

[250] Walker, 253.

dream come true for those who had wished for such a venture since the early 1920s. It also provided an historical impetus for the development of a Black theatre movement which was to follow as the second half of the twentieth century began to emerge in the United States.

The twenty-five years from the mid 1920s to 1950 was a true period of development for African-American theatre. The discussion of potential and promise was extended to include the need for serious training programs. The acknowledgment of a reality of non-existence by Ralph Matthews may have helped stimulate a more serious outlook and activism. Certainly the ideas and theories of the early 1920s became actual with the creation of the Federal Theatre Project and the opportunities it provided. The establishment of a true American Negro Theatre in 1940 was a hallmark event. Its closing in 1949 did provided new promise by proving some aspects of old potentials. A short but active history that had been established during this period would now make the era of the 1950s, 60s and 70s a time of radical new activism and establish a ground on which contemporary artists of the coming new millennium might stand with pride, power and a clearer understanding of their purpose and identity in an American theatre world.

CHAPTER 5

THE EVOLUTION INTO A REVOLUTIONARY THEATRE: BLACK THEATRE AND THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

Growing out of the American Negro Theatre came many new potentials. Those who had been given training and experience in the Federal Theatre Project of the 1930s, provided training and insight to a new group of eager Negro theatre artists in the workshops of the American Negro Theatre (A.N.T.) during the 1940s. By the beginning of the 1950s as the A.N.T. was folding up shop young actors, technicians, designers, and writers were free and ready to spread their wings in a wide range of directions. But there was still not much of a place for them to go.

Hughes and Meltzer report in Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the Negro in American Entertainment[251] that most of the roles for Negro actors were as maids, cooks and

[251] Langton Hughes and Milton Meltzer, Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the Negro in American Entertainment, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968.

servants, handymen and delivery men, or African slaves. They quote from one of the founding actors of the American Negro Theatre, Frederick O'Neal who stated:

> Negroes could be - and, in rare instances have been - cast as military personnel, civil servants, lawyers, clerks, policemen and so on without altering the artistic intent or integrity of the production. In some cases, artistic values have been heightened. . . . When Negroes are seen only in the kitchens on television, in motion pictures and on the stage, the audience is subtly impressed that this is the Negro's so-called 'place' in American life. When he is shown only as a porter in a factory where only whites are shown as skilled workers, the impression is given that he is only capable of filling such menial jobs.[252]

But with the 1950s came the emergence of a few young Negro playwrights who enlivened both Broadway and off-Broadway with plays that provided American audiences with a broader understanding of Negro life and experience. Alice Childress, William Branch, Louis Peterson and Charles Sebree all had plays produced during the early part of the decade.[253] Other off-Broadway Negro playwrights in the 1950s and early 1960s included Loften Mitchell, Bill Gunn, Errol John, William Hairston and Adrienne Kennedy. On Broadway there was Langston Hughes and a most interesting young woman named Lorraine Hansberry.

Hansberry received wide but mixed acclaim for her play, A Raisin in the Sun which first appeared in 1958.

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[252] Hughes and Meltzer, 211.

[253] Hughes and Meltzer, 212.

Some White critics claimed that it was not really a Negro play at all but more about a Jewish or Irish family.[254] But Hansberry's play had underlying revolutionary tones that were not clearly apparent to the White public. These revolutionary preambles were not fully apparent to the Negro public either, who would soon understand what was being alluded to in this play about modern Negroes by the young female Broadway sensation.

A Raisin in the Sun presented a dialectical picture of the Negro family, the Younger Family. It included a dominate Mother figure representing the "old Negro" ideology, an Americanized and materialistic adult son, and the most radical of all in the female character of the college student daughter with new ideas concerning the place of women in society and the place of things African in the consciousness of young American Negroes.

The concept of Revolution has certain similarities to the concept of Renaissance. Both concepts are concerned with the creation of a new order, with providing new approaches and establishing new criteria of aesthetics and operations. One major difference between the two concepts is the element of revolt that is inherent in Revolutionary philosophy. Moreover, Revolution is often associated with radicalism and extremism in its efforts to achieve newness.

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[254] Mitchell, Black Drama: The Story of the American Negro in the Theatre, New York: Hawthorn Books, 1967, 181-182.

The primary distinction between the two concepts may be seen in the radical extremism of Revolution in contrast to the Renaissance aim of rebirth and revival. In this regard, defining an American epoch of the 1960s and early 1970s as The Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement becomes slightly complex.

This era is often defined on the basis of its pervasive alliance with the most militant factions of the American Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Too often, the Renaissance elements and aims of the Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement are overlooked. This chapter looks at theoretical writings and the theoretical role that theatre itself played as part of the Black Arts - Black Power alliance, explaining The Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement as a developmental outgrowth of The Harlem Renaissance.

The 1960s in the United States was a major period of protest and revolt on a large scale. Much of such revolution came from the younger generation, called "hippies." Much of the revolt also came particularly from Negro youth, confronting years of subjegation and inequality suffered by their parents and older generations of Black Americans. Geneviève Fabre explains:

> In 1965 the younger generation was caught up in an outburst of violence that hit the black community harder than any of the wars in which its people had fought. Not sine the Harlem riots of 1935 had such a crisis swept through

> northern urban ghettos. Faced with explosive discontent and the repression that followed, the young artist and intellectual was forced to reexamine the relation of his art to the community. To write as an individual without reference to the world around him whose problems he shared was scandalous.[255]

One interesting association here is the notion of the younger generation of rebels and the Younger family name in Hansberry's play which predicted so much of what would develop into a Movement.

The larger "Movement" of the times was called The Civil Rights Movement, and effected almost every aspect of life in American for a substantial time. The sparks of a national Civil Rights Movement actually began as far back as 1947 with President Harry Truman' Commission on Civil Rights. In 1948, Truman (a) established a permanent Commission on Civil Rights, a Joint Congressional Committee on Civil Rights, and a Civil Rights Division in the Justice Department; (b) strengthened existing civil rights statues; (c) provided for federal protection against lynching; (d) provided for protection of the right to vote; (e) provided for prevention of discrimination in employment by establishing a Fair Employment Practices Commission; and (f) prohibited discrimination in interstate transportation facilities.[256]

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[255] Fabre, 19.

Truman's program struck directly at the institutional racism inherent in "states-rights" ideologies of the past attempting to assure legal, political and economic equality of opportunity for Negroes. The program was rejected by Congress but it did not stop Truman's order to integrate the armed services of the United States. The programs also helped to fuel efforts by the NAACP who sponsored several important Supreme Court actions on housing, voting and education in the late 1940s and 1950s. December 1955 marked the arrest of Rosa Parks in Montgomery Alabama, for refusing to give up her seat on a public bus to a White man. This act ignited a movement of nonviolent passive resistance led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In 1957, while Dwight D. Eisenhower was President, the Civil Rights Commission which Truman called for in 1948 was finally established and in 1960 a Civil Rights Act allowed for the sanctioning of federal voting rights. In that same year King moved his Southern Christian Leadership Conference to Atlanta and students at North Carolina A & T College in Greensboro staged a "sit-in" at an all White lunch counter. Scharine reports of the Greensboro "sit-ins":

> Almost instantaneously, that scene was repeated in dozens of cities before reshaping itself as

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[256] "President Truman's Civil Rights Program (1946-1948)," in Civil Rights and the American Negro, ed. Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando, New York: Washingto Square Press 1968, 372-81.

> "read-ins" in public libraries, "wade-ins" in municipal pools, "kneel-ins" at churches, and "stand-ins" at ticket windows of segregated theatres. . . . Within months, the demonstrations had an organization and a name - the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).[257]

The "sit-in" movement was followed by school desegregation efforts in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In the year 1963 two major events would impact the times in pivotal ways. One was the pre-Easter week demonstrations to help integrate Birmingham, Alabama. The other was the August 28, March on Washington "when more than 250,000 Americans - a quarter of them white - walked the mile from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Monument,"[258] to hear King proclaim a dream of equality and freedom for all Americans. But King provided an even more profound statement when he wrote from the jail in Birmingham following his arrest during the Good Friday deomonstration. He wrote: "If [the Negro] repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history.[259] King's words proved to be true in years that closely followed his writing.

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[257] Richard G. Scharine, From Class to Caste in American Drama: Political and Social Themes Since the 1930s, New York: Greenwood Press 1991, 141.

[258] Scharine, 143.

[259] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail (1963)," in Blaustein and Zangrando, Civil Rights and the American Negro, 485-86.

Scharine wrote of this time in history:

> the civil rights movement was achieving its deepest impression on the American sensibility. Henceforth, it would be obscured by legislation, the Black Power movement, Vietman, and the multiple unrests which claimed our attention in the 1960s.[260]

The nonviolent ideology of King did give way to radical and violent actions. Sit-ins became replaced by shouts of "burn-baby-burn" and the radical ideology of new leaders like Malcolm X who encouraged a philosophy of freedom and equality "by any means necessary." The Black Power Movement included protest of every kind from "sit-ins" and marches to boycotts and speeches to all out riots. Protest art and literature also became a part of the overall Black Power Movement in the form of The Black Arts Movement. From this developed a theatrical wing known as the Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement.

The idea of protest and revolt in Black drama did not begin with the Revolutionary Movement of the 1960s. This practice can be traced back to the first known plays written and performed by African-Americans. These include King Shotoway, written by Mr. Brown[261] and performed by James Hewlett and the African Company sometime in the early 1820s, and The Escape: or, A Leap for Freedom by William

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[260] Scharine, 142.

[261] Mr. Brown was the Black Caribbean-American owner and manager of the African Grove Tea Room and African Grove Theater, ca. 1820s. His first name is not known.

Wells Brown, published in 1858. Protest against racism has remained a dominant theme in the works of Black dramatists ever since. Errol Hill chronicles and analyzes the development of these facts in the 1986 essay, "The Revolutionary Tradition in Black Drama."[262]

Although revolutionary protest dramas are easy to find in the history of African-American Theatre, the Revolutionary Black Theatre era takes focus in this regard because it was such a prevailing and pervasive movement. An estimated four hundred plays were produced by nearly two hundred playwrights. The overwhelming majority of these plays where unashamedly propaganda for the larger cause of the Black Arts - Black Power alliance.

The more general Black Arts Movement of this era included the aesthetics of African-American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, novelists and visual artists. It was essentially a new version of the Harlem/ New Negro Renaissance, now renamed the New Black Renaissance. The distinction between this new movement and the criteria established during the 1920s involved the use of the term "radical." Poet and essayist Larry Neal, in a 1968 manifesto for the umbrella Black Arts Movement titled "The Black Arts Movement,"[263] explains that: "Black Art is

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[262] See, Errol Hill, "The Revolutionary Tradition in Black Drama," Theatre Journal, December 1986, 408-426.

[263] Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," The Drama Review

the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. . .radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community."[264]

Like the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement sought to change artistic perspectives by use of drastic measures. It was a concept which proposed "a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic" including "a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology."[265] It attempted to create an artistic expression that spoke "directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America,"[266] rather than trying to assimilate African-Americans into White society. Neal states:

> The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors'? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors? . . . In a context of world upheaval, ethics and aesthetics must interact positively and be consistent with the demands for a more spiritual world. Consequently, the Black Arts Movement is an ethical movement. Ethical, that is, from the viewpoint of the oppressed.[267]

(T40), 12.4 (1968), 29-39.

[264] Neal, 29-39.

[265] Neal, 29.

[266] Neal, 30.

[267] Neal, 30.

It was during this period that the term "Afrocentricity" began to emerge on a large scale as a way of identifying this "viewpoint of the oppressed," the establishment of a more positive identity and a return to traditional African spiritual values and ethical behavior. These basic concepts were the same as 1920s Renaissance concepts. But the major difference from The Harlem Renaissance was that The Black Arts Movement sought to create a completely separate Black world rather than a Black-ground within a larger American framework.

The ideologies of Black Arts and Black Power rejected the notion of a White world or a White audience altogether. The aims were to create a separate framework with separate rules, and address itself entirely to a Black audience with Black awareness and Black sensibilities. In the specific realm of theatre, the major debate among African-American dramatists and critics was centered around "the function and structure of Black theatre"[268] and what would distinguish it from Eurocentric theatre.

LeRoi Jones, who later became known as Imamu Amiri Baraka, held positions as both dramatist and critic and emerged as the spiritual and intellectual leader of The Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement. In 1965 Jones/Baraka wrote an essay titled "In Search of the Revolutionary

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[268] Hill, Introduction to The Theater of Black Americans: Vols. 1 & 2, Inglewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall 1980, 6.

Theatre,"[269] which became a manifesto for the Movement. This manifesto declared that The Black Revolutionary Theatre was to be a theatre of assault; that it would show the cruelty that Whites had bestowed on Black races throughout history.

Baraka's aesthetic theory outlined new politically militant criteria for African-American drama. In addition to the four fundamentals prescribed by DuBois during the Harlem Renaissance,[270] Baraka stated that: "The Revolutionary Theatre should force change, it should be change."[271] This change was to be on all levels but directly focused on the social status and conditions of Black Americans. Through theatrical means, Baraka wanted to "EXPOSE" the racial ills of Western society and teach Whites the ramifications of hatred and denial of what he called "the supremacy of the Spirit." His doctrine states:

> This should be a theatre of World Spirit. Where the spirit can be shown to be the most competent force in the world. Force. Spirit. Feeling.

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[269] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), "In Search of the Revolutionary Theatre," Negro Digest, 16.6 (1966), 21-24. This essay was originally commissioned by The New York Times in December 1964, but was refused, with the statement that the editors could not understand it. The Village Voice also refused to run this essay. It was first published in Black Dialogue. Later printed in The Liberator, V.7 (1965).

[270] The four fundamentals of DuBois' criteria for Black Theatre were presented in Dubois, "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre: The Story of a Little Theatre Movement," The Crisis, 32.3, 1926, and discussed in Chapter Three.

[271] Jones/ Baraka, 21.

> The language will be anybody's, but tightened by the poet's backbone. And even the language must show what the facts are in this consciousness epic, what's happening. We will talk about the world, and the preciseness with which we are able to summon the world, will be our art.[272]

In addressing the notion of the spirit or the spiritual nature of African-American people, Baraka was making direct connection to DuBois and Locke who both saw potential in the depth of an esoteric metaphysical connection between the souls of Black Americans and cosmic universal forces. This spiritual consciousness, Baraka suggests, is developed by listening to ancestral voices that speak to the soul or spirit in silent meditative moments. In those moments the world outside of the spiritual connection can only see craziness, because they can only see life and the world on a material plain. They are denied the DuBoisian "second-sight" of the gifted Black soul.

Baraka was calling for the same focus on African-American spirituality as the aesthetic theorist and philosophers of The Harlem Renaissance. In Baraka's view, the loss of African-Americans' connection to intuititive spirit and power was due to their victimization by Whites. Baraka saw his theatre as a theatre of victims. Everyone involved in this theatre was to see the world from the eyes of the victimized.

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[272] Jones/ Baraka, 21.

Baraka's aim was to show African-Americans and White Americans what had been created by White Western hegemonic domination of the world so that the world might change. He wanted to show that the very existence of African-Americans as descendants of slaves makes them victims of an oppositional reality. The circumstance and conditions of slavery and the untold suffering, degradation and death bestowed on such people makes them victims. He argued that the fraud, swindle, trickery and manipulation of Blacks by Whites and White power structures continue to victimize. Baraka wrote:

> Our theatre will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they themselves are victims, if they are blood brothers. And what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that pre-revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught. We will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony, if it means some soul will be moved, moved to actual life understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be. We are preaching virtue and feeling, and a natural sense of the self in the world.[273]

This is passionate revolutionary radicalism. However, it also fulfills its purpose of showing the powerful underlying effects of prolonged victimization on both the victim and the victimizer.

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[273] Jones/ Baraka, 22-23.

For Baraka and a large number of Black Americans, social victimization was the true reality of Western hegemomy. Baraka wanted to alter the White-ground reality and expose that reality from the perspective of the abused. He felt he was fulfilling a moral obligation to the spiritual essence of African-American existence. He expressed an expectation and awareness of the effects when he wrote:

> [White] Americans will hate the revolutionary theatre because it will be out to destroy them and whatever they believe is real.[274]

This statement supports Margaret Wilkerson's claim of the different world of reality experienced by Blacks and Whites. It also provides a possible reordering of ideology so as to "make the White idea of reality metaphorical" as suggested by Leslie Saunders.

The Revolutionary Theatre saw Whites and their ancestors as victimizers. The White world, as represented by Western society, was seen as evil, corrupt and totally consumed by materialistic desires. The Revolutionary Theatre accused and attacked Western society for its preoccupation with the material aspects of existence and its rejection of spiritual virtue. Again in the words of Baraka: "The Revolutionary Theatre must hate them for

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[274] Jones/ Baraka, 23.

hating. For presuming with their technology to deny the supremacy of the Spirit."[275]

It must be remembered that part of the catalyst for this revolutionary ideology was the pursuit of liberty and the quest for social and racial equality. With that vision at the forefront, the plays presented in this theatre were calls to action. While the primary goal may have been a call to political action, the ultimate goal was to move Black Americans into a philosophy of positive personal action. Baraka suggested that plays be used as tactical weapons in the psychological war against White hegemony; as "bullets to be used against the enemy."[276] The practicality of this philosophy is expressed in the following segment from Baraka's manifesto:

> The Revolutionary Theatre must take dreams and give them a reality. It must isolate the ritual and historical cycles of reality. But it must be food for all these who need food, and daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind. But it is a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on.[277]

There are two aspects of this statement that need closer scrutiny: 1.) The Revolutionary Theatre as a theatre of reality; and 2.) The Revolutionary Theatre as a theatre of

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[275] Jones/ Baraka, 21.

[276] D. Turner, Introduction to Black Drama in America, Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications 1971, 18.

[277] Jones/ Baraka, 21.

assault. By looking at two other theories of the Black Arts Movement these points become clearer.

Ed Bullins emerged out of San Francisco as a playwright during this era to become resident dramaturg at Harlem's New Lafayette Theatre. Bullins, along with Baraka, is now considered one of the Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement's most profound and prolific dramatists. In 1966, Bullins published an essay which defined his approach to writing for the Revolutionary Theatre entitled "Theatre of Reality."[278] In this essay, he rejects White theatrical tradition and dramaturgy in radical revolutionary fashion with the statement: "Aristotle and his aesthetic dogmas are not of this time and never had been meant for the black artist anyway."[279]

Bullins explained that method and technique were not the immediate goals of the Revolutionary Movement. The exploration and creation of new characters, new themes and new definitions were far more important. He was concerned with exposing the negative realities of humanity by presenting honest, rather than perfectly structured, African-American characters and themes. In order to dramatize the radical psychological journey being experienced by Black Americans, Bullins thought it was

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[278] Ed Bullins, "Theatre of Reality," Negro Digest, 16.6 (1966), 60-66.

[279] Bullins, 64.

necessary to utilize a variety of theatrical styles and methods. He writes:

> It is not a call for a return to realism or naturalism that this theater calls for; it is the exposure of illusion through exploding myths and lies that are disguised as reality and truths. These myths, and especially those concerning the black man, clutter the heart of his existence, his humanity.[280]

The theatrical reality that Bullins sought is a Black sense of reality and is counter to what White society may see as truth. It is bent on exposing the ills of such a society, especially as it relates to that society's degradation of Blacks. The aim of Bullins' Theatre of Reality was to create characters with "metaphysical yearnings"[281] and use them as propoganda in a war of mind and spirit. He would later identify his focus on African-American characters as part of what he called "Black dialectics" with two branches: "dialectic of change," which he associated with protest and Black revolutionary writing, and "dialectic of experience,"[282] which was the experience of "being" and expressing the realities of the African-American "self."

Another radical playwright of the Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement, Ron Milner, articulated the sentiments of several African-American dramatists in agreement with

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[280] Bullins, 65.

[281] Bullins, 66.

[282] Bullins, Introduction to The New Lafayette Theatre Presents, Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/ Doubleday 1974, 4.

Baraka in "Black Theater - Go Home."[283] Here Milner outlines his view of the aesthetic image of what Black theatre should be. He gives new definition to the term Black Theatre, which until this time had been called Negro Theatre. Milner writes that Black theatre is:

> The ritualized reflection and projection of a unique and particular way of being, born of the unique and particular conditioning of black people leasing time on this planet controlled by white-men; and having something to do with the breaking of that "leasing syndrome." A theater emerging from artists who realize that, for black people of this world, and, specifically, this country, every quote "universal" human malady, dilemma, desire, or wonder, is, by the heat of the pressure of white-racism, compounded and enlarged, agitated and aggravated, accented and distilled to make that omni-suffusing, grinding sense of being we once called the blues but might now just term: *blackness*. [sic] From this peculiar and particular extra-dimension of being, of experiences, of conditioning, will come the kind of theater I'm looking for . . . It will be a theater having to do with love of one's self, and one's personal, national, and international family; with wariness and hatred of one's personal, national, and international enemies; with, ideally, points as to how to break their grip and splatter their power.[284]

The theatre that Milner envisioned was undoubtedly revolutionary. The fight for psychical, mental, and aesthetic liberation of its artists and audience was at the forefront. This was yet another revival of Negro Renaissance notions of artistic spirituality.

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[283] Ronald Milner, "Black Theater - Go Home!," The Black Aesthetic, ed, Addison Gayle, Jr., New York: Doubleday, 1971, 306-312.

[284] Milner, 306-307.

By associating the struggle for this aesthetic goal with blues music, Milner makes another connection to the earlier Harlem Renaissance theorists in understanding the importance of music as a primary element in personifying the uniqueness of the African-American artistic identity. Milner joined Baraka in attempting to focus African-American artists, specifically playwrights, on their psychic connections to a universal self: to understand the repetitive nature of history; that as artists who understand the possibilities of the repetition of experiences in history, they should:

> try to find the terms, and the pictures, which will most simply clarify those experiences and that knowledge for the you's who do not, or could not, understand what is, or was, happening to you, and to future you's who will need to be warned and directed in terms from inside that level we call: blackness - for it is within that level that most of the added, making or breaking, weight comes.[285]

Here, Milner calls upon Black playwrights to take on the pragmatic function of the organic intellectual. He suggests that in order to find this possibility, the Black artists must "go home," in every way, figuratively and literally. He felt that aesthetics of a particular identity group can only be developed in an environment which is familiar and comfortable for that group; that artists must be within the environments of "home" in order

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[285] Milner, 309.

to feel indigenous and organic. Only in this way could they master the techniques of detailing the Black existence. This was his call for separation from the American mainstream; another argument with the need for separate theatres, for a theatre "near us" as Dubois had already concluded.

The ideas of Bullins and Milner merge with the manifesto of Baraka in the search for a means of expressing the ethical humanity of African-Americans in a positive theatrical aesthetic. For all three, the Revolutionary Theatre Movement required a combination of ethics and aesthetics in its presentations. It recognized creative imagination and its relation to "image" and "magic" as an essential element. Baraka delivers a bit of prophetic pragmatism of his own as he states:

> What is called the imagination (from image, magi, magic, magician, etc.) is a practical vector from the soul. It stores all data, and can be called on to solve all our "problems." The imagination is the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as "things." Imagination (image) is all possibility, because from the image, the initial circumscribed energy, and use (idea) is possible. And so begins that image's use in the world. Possibility is what moves us.[286]

Baraka speaks of the potential for African-American artists to couple innate spiritual power with the magic of creative imagination in opposition to Western notions of "high art."

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[286] Jones/ Baraka, 23.

He proposes that the imagination becomes a means of projecting a self image as subjects rather than objects or "things."

The dramatic theorists of the Harlem Renaissance had already pointed out that magic and spirituality are distinctive elements of African-Amerian creativity. They are not distinctive to African-Americans, but aspects of a long standing association with ideas of ancestry shared with other Black cultures, Native-Americans, and tropical peoples and cultures seen as primitive and savage by Eurocentrics and positivists.

Baraka sought a pragmatic functional art form that could express the internal anger and frustrations of African-Americans while at the same time utilizing their spiritual energies to create imaginative positive change. He wanted to expose the ills of society in order to correct those ills and establish new virtues for humanity. In his words: "All men live in the world, and the world ought to be a place for them to live."[287] This line of thinking is in direct agreement with DuBois's "Criteria of Negro Art" and the call for Negro art as propaganda of equal measure to that of Whites.

It remains ironic, but understandable, that the Eurocentric encoded image of Baraka defines him as a

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[287] Jones/ Baraka, 23.

radical racist militant who preached only separatism, hatred and anger in his work. This is a problem which arises from narrow readings of Baraka's writings and out of the biases and shallow perspectives of White critics and audiences who continually fail to see or understand the multiple functions of Black Art.

The plays developed during this era were indeed propaganda and revolutionary protest. They were also clear expressions and insights rooted in the lived experiences of their creators. What most Eurocentric criticism seems to focus on is the overwhelming feelings of anger and hostility inherent in much of Black expressive art without analyzing the reasons for the revolutionary feeling in the work. The external oppression that suppresses the inner spirit and innate artistic awareness of Black artists is the same as that spoken of by Alain Locke in 1941 concerning stilted and repressive direction of actors.

The ideologies of formalist and structuralist critics, and teachers of Black writers also have potential to oppress truth and personal expression as they encode their own limited views of standards in regard to works of art. Often Black artists are told by White critics, director casting agents and teachers that they are "too emotional" in writing and performing for the theatre. It is difficult

for the "other" in this case to realize that they present a form of emotional oppression which only works to develop deeper rooted feelings of anger and repression with little outlet for release. It may do well for "others" to realize in regard to Black arts that faults in the earth's crust must quake at some point in order to relieve tension and resettle and that all volcanoes at some point in history will erupt.

Anger in Black arts can be a positive connection to the passion and emotion that sustains it. It is both understandable and sad that White critics and audiences trained in the Eurocentric traditions of emotional restraint seem unable to grasp this concept. Although, it is much easier to understand why they reject such deeply felt displays of emotion.

The fundamental difference in proponents of the Revolutionary Black Theatre and Black Arts Movements from those who came before was the complete and total rejection of the White audience and White standards of criticism. Black artists realized that when they created work for the consumption of Whites, "the result was usually an artistic creation filled with half truths."[288] The larger society was not interested in or capable of accepting Black views on the nature of America's problems. In order for the

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[288] Addison Gayle, Jr. The Black Aesthetic. Garden City, New York: Doubleday 1971.

Black artist to succeed in the larger society, their works had to be disguised in myths, morality, folklore, and "plain lies" about their own nature. Even at this point in history, images and ideas of African-Americans established during the minstrel era continued to prevail in the minds of many Americans. With the freedom to speak directly to an audience of African-American peers, it was hoped that Black artists would be more inclined to develop a uniqueness and honesty in their works.

In 1971, Addison Gayle, Jr. attempted to provide a critical dimension to the aesthetics of African-American art and culture with the publication of a book of critical and theoretical essays titled The Black Aesthetic.[289] This publication gave the Black Arts Movement a parallel manifesto to The New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance. In the introduction to this work, Gayle addresses the issue of emotional passion in Black Art. His comments indicate the different perspective of Afrocentric criticism from that of White critics:

> The black artist in the American society who creates without interjecting a note of anger is creating not as a black man, but as an American. For anger in black art is as old as the first utterances by black men on American soil.[290]

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[289] Gayle, xxi.

[290] Gayle, xvi.

Gayle, like Baraka, acknowledged anger and frustration as factors in African-American art. He also echoed the need not to extinguish this passion, but to use it in full conjunction with positive creative imagination in order to portray the humanity of the African-American race. Gayle's anthology pointed out the need for new criteria of criticism for the evaluation of African-American artists. The Black Aesthetic identified Galye as a prominant leader of the new Black Aesthetic Movement, which became the theoretical and critical arm of the Black Arts and Revolutionary Black Theatre Movements.

The Black Aesthetic Movement focused on artistic methodology. Its aim was to revive the role of the critic in Black aesthetic tradition and raise critical awareness to a higher level than did the 1920s Harlem Renaissance era. It sought to get beyond evaluation of art "in terms of its beauty" and focus more on "the transformation from ugliness to beauty that the work of art demands from its audience."[291] In this way the Black audience would be educated and moved to new awareness and self respect, instilling a more positive identity and a more ethical and spiritual character. Gayle explained the ideals of the Black Aesthetic Movement as follows:

> The question for the black critic today is not how beautiful is a melody, a play, a poem, or a

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[291] Gayle, xxiii.

> novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play, or novel made the life of a single black man? How far has the work gone in transforming an American Negro into an African-American or black man? The Black Aesthetic, then, as conceived by this writer, is a corrective - a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism.[292]

This passage also helps to illustrate the important role given to artistic endeavor in the cause of liberation of African-Americans in the era of Civil Rights and Black Power. Hoyt Fuller, then editor of Black World magazine, explained the difficulties of aligning Black Arts with politics and attempting to establish a Black Aesthetic Movement:

> The movement will be reviled as "racism-in-reverse," and its writers labeled "racists," opprobrious terms which are flung lightly at black people now that the piper is being paid for all the long years of rejection and abuse which black people have experienced at the hands of white people - with few voices raised in objection. . . . Is this too harsh and sweeping a generalization? White people might think so; black people will not; which is a way of stating the problem and the prospect before us.[293]

Revolutionary writers were indeed labeled racist. The revolutionary protest in their themes and the characters they created who revolted against White authority and an American hegemonic status quo was considered shocking and profane by most White Americans. For dramatists, it was a

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[292] Gayle, xxiii.

[293] Hoyt W. Fuller, "Towards A Black Aesthetic," in The Black Aesthetic, ed, Addison Gayle, Jr., New York: Doubleday 1971, 3-12.

busy and productive phase in the developing history of African-American dramatic tradition and the continuing struggle to reject and erase the still visible minstrel image.

An overview of the theoretical history of The Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement reveals an on-going struggle for self identity and the establishment of an African-American dramatic aesthetic. The struggle takes on new guises and repeats a cycle of protest and experimentation, revolt and rejection, and the assertion of new ideas in an attempt to crush the domination and limitation of Eurocentric ideological structures.

Potential and possibility are aspects of African-American aesthetics that have always been taught, yet rarely fully appreciated. What remains now is to utilize all of the positive elements of what African-American dramatic tradition has taught and move past the negatives onto the higher spiritual plain of the possible. The challenge of the present is to accept the possibilities of the future.

Chapter 6

A NEW AGE OF POSSIBILITIES: JUSTIFYING POST-REVOLUTIONARY AFRICAN-AMERICAN THEATRE AESTHETICS

The previous chapters have provided a general overview of an African-American dramatic theoretical tradition in unwritten form from the late eighteenth century and the establishment of a written tradition beginning in the 1920s through the 1970s. This simple survey appears to substantiate Fabre's conclusion, that African-American theatre was indeed born of historical and sociological conflict and has continuously been in quest of a self expressed identity.[294] The goal of this chapter is to illustrate the effects such an historically ambiguous theoretical development has had on contemporary conditions for a theatre aesthetic by, for, about and near the hearts and minds of African-Americans.

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[294] Fabre, Drumbeats, Masks and Metaphors.

The radical influences of the 1960s and the writers and theorists of the Black Revolutionary Theatre-Black Arts Movement had profound and lasting effects on almost all segments of previously marginalized theatres and their practitioners. For Black theatre in particular, the Afrocentric sensibility kindled during the era of the 1960s and early 1970s created a spiritual and intellectual connection to things African in almost every way. This was also true for Black theatre artists looking for aesthetic principles with connections to purity of roots and an African based philosophical consciousness.

In 1974, an anthology of plays that expressed such a consciousness appeared. It was called Kuntu Drama: Plays of the African Continuum.[295] The anthology was collected and published with an introduction by Paul Carter Harrison. The plays and the writings which preceded them presented, or resurrected, African philosophical concepts as a basis for African-American theatre and drama. The preface to this work was written by Oliver Jackson, and explains first, the term African continuum as:

> concepts and beliefs common to African peoples the world over are the basis of the unbroken continuity of the African continuum. Foremost among these concepts is the belief in the fundamental spiritual nature of the universe, as well as the attendant belief that man is

[295] Paul Carter Harrison, Kuntu Drama: Plays of the African Continuum, New York: Grove Press 1974.

> essentially spirit, and as such basically irreducible.
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> The African continuum is therefore those fundamental concepts that the black man has created in the universe that reflects his own image. The strong ancestral base (Africa, the potent ancestor) is the force for statehood, independence, freedom, and all else that truly reflects the African spirit wherever it is located. It is particularly evident, this African continuum, in the music of Africans, and in the use of words, images, and sounds.[296]

Jackson goes on to explain the African continuum as a modal concept,[297] which views the cosmos as a totally integrated spiritual environment in which all forces interact. This means that the continuum is "essentially harmonious" with the cosmos and becomes, or should become under this philosophy, the basis of ethical and moral behavior. Such ethics, morals and virtues are the same as those professed by Baraka in his 1964-65 manifesto, "The Revolutionary Theatre."

In relation to Larry Neal's earlier statement of the Black Arts Movement's opposition to "any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community,"[298] Jackson explains:

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[296] Oliver Jackson, in the Preface to Kuntu Drama, ix.

[297] "Mode" is defined as a reality - an active force that determines all states of existence within its active perimeter. There are many realities or modes. An example is the dream state, in which there are two or more realities: the physicality of the dreamer (his/her bed, the room, the city in which he/she lives, the time of sleep) and the dream, which may have a different place, time, and sequence of actions. [Taken from the text of Kuntu Drama, xi.]

[298] Neal, 29-39.

> people of the African continuum seek to establish and maintain their proper relationship to other men, to the force referred to as nature, and to the cosmos itself. Individually, man's uniqueness cannot and does not have significance in isolation of family, clan, or society. . . . Individuality, then, is not a definitive characteristic of spiritual man and has no cosmic force of significance; therefore, society is its proper and only meaningful context.[299]

This denotes both a collective spirituality and a commitment of the personal or individual self to the needs and purposes of the larger community or society as part of the philosophical realm of Afrocentrism; a sense of collective unity and practical purpose. It also refutes the Eurocentric notion of universality, based on standards of valuation and "reason" as established within Eurocentric perspectives. Once again, Margaret Wilkerson's statement on the polarities of White and Black world views and senses of reality is given support and clarity of meaning.

Jackson then explains that the fundamental source of power in regard to African collective philosophical thought is intelligence. This intelligence is basically comprised of individual experience which becomes more effective when generated as collective or group experience, or as group intelligence of a community or race. According to Jackson, such intelligence is brought about "through the use of psychic conjuring that employs concentration, objects, word

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[299] Jackson, x.

gestures that are potent in the achievement of desired action, through what has been incorrectly labeled 'magic.'"[300] It is this conjuring and bringing forth of power in the form of the forces of God that Jackson says is the supreme test of man's spiritual power and that of the collective community of ancestors; the African continuum. This conjuring may come in the form of prayers, songs and chants, sincere wishes and hopes, or meditative thoughts and trances.

This notion of psychic conjuring is an historical part of African cultures known as divination. Divination is a system or way of knowing. It is a spiritual concept vital to understanding of the past, present and future and a very real part of any African based philosophy. Philip Peek, editor of African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing, explains in the introduction to his text what divination is and how it may best be perceived.

> Every human community recognizes a need for the special knowledge gained through divination. While this need is hardly of the same order as the need for food and shelter, it is nonetheless universal. . . . A divination system is a standardized process deriving from a learned discipline based on an extensive body of knowledge. This knowledge may or may not be literally expressed during the interpretation of the oracular message. . . . Divination systems are not simply closed ideologies founded on religious beliefs but are dynamic systems of knowledge upon which the proper ordering of

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[300] Jackson, xi.

> social action is based. . . . No aspect of life is *not* touched by divination, and so the process becomes critical to any study of African cultures and peoples. . . . African divination systems involve a combination of (as we commonly label cognitive processes) "logical-analytical" and "intuitive-synthetical" modes of thinking, while the European tradition of separation of these modes is rigidly maintained.[301]

What this all means is that theatre based on African philosophical concepts acknowledges a world of realities which are different and oppositional to Eurocentric ideologies. The act of divination is itself a sacred and ceremonial ritual with clear metaphysical purpose and meaning. It is a cultural acknowledgement of a higher order, a higher system of power, a respect for a greater source of knowing than humans. The insightful knowledge gained from such an act as divination is essential to African philosophical enlightenment, which is difficult if not impossible to understand without a belief in or experience with cosmic connections to the God power or force or source of all universal knowledge. The ritual of theatre in the form of Kuntu drama is one of the sacred ceremonies capable of achieving this form of harmonious power.

Kuntu drama, then, is defined as:

> drama that has, as its ultimate purpose, to reveal and invoke the reality of the particular mode that it has ritualized. This theater style

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[301] Philip M. Peek, ed., African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991, 1-3.

> depends on power and power invocation. It is magical in that it attempts to produce modification in behavior through the combined use of word power, dance power, and music power. It is sacred theater in the sense that it seeks to fulfill a spiritual revelation.[302]

In the realm of this kind of theatre, the play or theatre piece is a "ritualized context of reality" with positive spiritual purpose. For Black people in the United States who live perpetually under and within the invisible oppressive strain of American hegemonic domination, Kuntu drama has potential to be both prophetic and pragmatic. It includes the audience in the ritual as part of a community and the invocation of the spirits who help bring forth the enlightened insights of the ritual or play releases beneficent power to the participants, which include the audience and the players: Theatre in this sense takes on many of the same characteristics of the Black Church service. Jackson explains:

> In this theater there is no separation between audience and actors. The mode is the event; its success as a reality depends on its power to persuade to action its audience. Kuntu drama recognizes no separation - distance perhaps - but no separation.[303]

Kuntu drama is essentially more ritual than drama. But it allows for group participation in the same way as in the Black church service or popular music concerts where call

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[302] Jackson, xi.

[303] Jackson, xi.

and response is encouraged. This is in direct opposition to the restrained and voyeuristic mode expected at Eurocentric theatrical and high art functions. The Kuntu play is intended to invoke power of the cosmos and the spirit world toward some purposeful good for humanity. The play may employ all the devices and elements of conventional theatre and drama. But the actors as characters are participants in the ritual and are the vehicles of this power. Their "attitude, speech, dress, song, and music describe and project the aspect of the force or power needed or eventually revealed within the mode."[304]

Several Black theatre companies that grew from and within the Revolutionary Black Theatre era made use of the techniques and philosophies of Kuntu drama. Most noticable among them were the New Lafayette Theatre Company and the National Black Theatre, both located in Harlem, New York. Indeed the intent and potential of this mode of dramatic presentation is rooted in its connection to Africa and the past of Black Americans. The ritualistic theatre which developed in relation to the concepts of Kuntu remains popular with Black theatres looking for an Afrocentric purpose and identity. These concepts have also evolved and been transformed by insightful Black artists looking for

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[304] Jackson, xii.

the unique qualities of a theatre that makes use of the special hybrid nature of the African as American. One such artists to find success in this endeavor near the later part of the 1970s was Ntozake Shange, who is credited with the creation of a new style of American theatre called the choreopoem. This form and much of Shange's work that followed is essentially Kuntu.

Shange acknowledges the influences of many Black and Latin writers on her work. Notable among those influential figures was W. E. B. DuBois, who was a friend of her family and is reported to have tucked her into bed on occasions when he visited her as a child. Another influence was Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), radical poet and philosophical leader of the Black Revolutionary Theare Movement.

Shange's world of cosmic experience and connection to the African continuum is strong. Her vision of the world and the theatre incorporates elements of music, dance, word, song, etc.; all the essentials required or recognized within the Kuntu philosophy. She has been recognized by a number of sources as a leading writer of feminist poetry, essays and theatre pieces. While she acknowledges and accepts the feminist role, she also always acknowledges and accepts the particular role of being an African-American female artist.

In the foreword to her Three Pieces, Shange outlines major concerns for the development of African-American

dramatic traditions in a manifesto of her unique style and philosophy titled "unrecovered loses/ black theater traditons [sic]."[305] Shange's aesthetic is distinguished from traditional Eurocentric culture by its multi-disciplinary approach of mixing African-American forms of dance, music and poetic language. Her works are particularized within the traditions of African-American theatre by the inclusion of all of the aforementioned elements in combination with the prophetic and pragmatic Kuntu requirement of intelligence.

Shange's ultimate goal, akin to that of the Black Revolutionary Theatre theorists, is the creation of "an independently created afro-american aesthetic,"[306] which allows for creative expression based on her personal experiences and perspectives as both a feminist and an African-American. Her aesthetic must include music, dance and speech as it has evolved naturally from African-American culture, so that it expresses the particular joys and pains of that culture. This aesthetic must identify what theatre is in an African-American sense rather than an Indo-European one. It must be an aesthetic that stands on the hyphen between the African and the American, illuminating the uniqueness of that position. It must be

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[305] Ntozake Shange, "unrecovered loses/ black theater traditons," [sic] introduction to Three Pieces, New York: St. Martin's, 1981.

[306] Shange, ix.

based on traditions that express the reasons and needs for a distinctively identifiable African-American sensibility.

Toward this end, Shange's work attempts to show life in a highly personal and idiosyncratic manner and often takes on a politically radical temperament. Her personal struggle is one of finding objective means to project subjective ideas while avoiding obvious imitation of existing styles. In working against the constructs of European traditions, she is forced to reach deep into her psyche for a unique form of expression. What emerges is the personification of a fiery, emotional intellect and a heightened spirituality that is often beyond the comprehension of traditionalist thinkers. Shange writes:

> as a poet in american theater/ i find most activity that takes place on our stages overwhelmingly shallow/ stilted & imitative. that is probably one of the reasons i insist on calling myself a poet or writer/ rather than a playwright/ i am interested solely in the poetry of a moment/ the emotional & aesthetic impact of a character or a line. for too long now afro-americans in theater have been duped by the same artificial aesthetics that plague our white counterparts/ "the perfect play," as we know it to be/ a truly european framework for european psychology/ cannot function efficiently for those of us from this hemisphere.[307]

Shange believes that European-developed laws of dramatic construction are in direct opposition to her instinctive needs and purposes as a Black writer. Her personal writing style illustrates a deliberate disregard for such notions.

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[307] Shange, ix.

Thus, for Shange the physical action of writing expresses her self identified persona and is a revolutionary statement in itself.

An expressionistic use of language is immediately apparent in Shange's work upon seeing her printed texts. Her manner of writing everything in lower case lettering and her use of the virgule, or slash mark (/), as the punctuation of choice is clearly abstract and non-traditional. She also makes use of other informal modes of writing, such as the ampersand sign (&) or the letter "n" in place of the word "and," and the use of the letter "z" often in place of the letter "s," particularly as a word ending. She sometimes minimizes words to only the letters needed for their understandable pronunciation, such as "blk" for black, "abt" for about, "wd" for would, and "ta" for to, which gives this particular word and others like it more of the sound of Black dialect. She gives reason for her use of this creative and expressive mode:

> i cant count the number of times i have viscerally wanted to attack deform n maim the language that i waz taught to hate myself in/ the language that perpetuates the notions that cause pain to every black child as he/she learns to speak of the world & the "self." yes /being an afro-american writer is something to be self conscious abt/ & yes/ in order to think n communicate/ i haveta fix my tool to my needs/ i have to take it apart to the bone/ so that the malignancies/ fall away/ leaving us space to literally create our own image.[308]

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[308] Shange, xii.

This act of protest and revolt allows and demands an assertion of a self identified aesthetic declaration. It is a (re)claiming ritual of warranted and justifiable (re)creation of the personal art of writing which thus expresses a prophetic freedom of ones personal artisitic spirit. It opens the soul and the psyche to what has previously been unexposed. In this rather lengthy passage from "unrecovered losses. . . " Shange explains:

> i have not ceased to be amazed when i hear members of an audience whispering to one another in the foyers of theaters/ that they had never imagined they cd feel so much for characters/ even though they were black (or colored/ or niggers, if they don't notice me eavesdropping). on the other hand/ i hear other members of an audience say that there were so many things in the piece that they had felt/ experienced/ but had never found words to express/ even privately/ to themselves. these two phenomena point to the same dilemma/ the straightjacket that the english language slips over the minds of all americans. there are some thoughts that black people just dont have/ according to popular mythology/ so white people never "imagine" we are having them/ & black people "block" vocabularies we perceive to be white folks' ideas. this will never do. for in addition to the obvious stress of racism n poverty/ afro-american culture/ in attempts to carry on/ to move forward/ has minimized its "emotional" vocabulary to the extent that admitting feelings of rage, defeat, frustration is virtually impossible outside a collective voice. so we can add self-inflicted repression to the cultural causes of our cultural disease of high blood pressure.[309]

Here, Shange reminds us of the power and constructed restraining capacity of language. We are reminded that the

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[309] Shange, xii.

freedom to express oneself as one pleases, particularly in an artistic or aesthetic way, is one of the major available means for the emergence of Truth as seen by artists in the practice of artistic expression. Thus, in this manifesto, she challenges and encourages freedom of expression in the style and form of writing - which should lead to release of emotional constraints which are inherent in the tradition of writing and expressing in Euro-traditional ways. In the following passage she speaks of inherent potentials that are particular for African-American writers:

> the fact that we are an interdisciplinary culture/ that we understand more than verbal communication/ lays a weight on afro-american writers that few others are lucky enough to have been born into. we can use with some skill virtually all our physical senses/ as writers committed to bringing the world as we remember it/ imagine it/ & know it to be to the stage/ we must use everything we've got.[310]

In another part of the essay she speaks about a particular theatre piece of hers and the way that it was created as an illustrative example of the possible.

> in the first version of BOOGIE WOOGIE LANDSCAPES i presented myself with the problem of having my person/ body, voice & language/ address the space as if i were a band/ a dance company & a theater group all at once. cuz a poet shd do that/ create an emotional environment/ felt architecture. . . . we are responsible for saying how we feel. we "ourselves" are high art. our world is honesty & primal response.[311]

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[310] Shange, x.

[311] Shange, xi.

Like theorists from the past, Shange also speaks about the present moment of her writing, the late 1970s, in the history of African-American Theatre's development. In the following passage she makes reference to the retro- or nostalgic trend in Broadway presentations of successful Black musical revues. She comments:

> with the advent of at least 6 musicals about the lives of black musicians & singers/ (EUBIE, BUBBLING BROWN SUGAR, AIN'T MISBEHAVIN', MAHALIA, etc.)/ the lives of millions of black people who dont sing & dance for a living/ are left unattended to in our theatrical literature. not that the lives of Eubie Blake or Fats Waller are well served in productions lacking any significant book/ but if the lives of our geniuses arent artfully rendered/ & the lives of our regular & precious are ignored/ we have a double loss to reckon with.[312]

Shange's point here relates back to statements made by Negro theorists and critics of the 1920s and 1930s who made virtually the same comments about Black theatre during their own times. Her desire is to focus the themes of Black stage storytelling on the reasons and purposes for the success of Black musical stars.

In Shange's opinion, the question of importance is, "how did Black artists get to be stars within the frame of the American White-ground?" By focusing on the reasons and purposes behind their successes, the present generations might better see and understand the nature of the "dogged strength" of African-American artistic spirit and

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[312] Shange, ix.

sensibility rather than merely the song and dance, or simply the outer layers and not the the inner feeling and intellect that their works masked. Shange suggests that if the themes of the inner selves of historical Black artists become catalysts for Black theatrical writing, then what might better be revealed is an examination of such artists "in order to give ourselves what we think they gave the worlds they lived in/ which is an independently created afro-american aesthetic."[313] She further contends:

> we must move our theater into the drama of our lives/ which is what the artists we keep resurrecting (or allowing others to resurrect) did in the first place[314]

She proposes this be done by:

> i wd suggest that: we demolish the notion of straight theater for a decade or so, refuse to allow playwrights to work without dancers & musicians. "coon shows" were somebody else's idea. we have integrated the notion that a drama must be words/ with no music & no dance/ & most of us can sing & dance/ cuz that wd take away the seriousness of the event/ cuz we all remember too well/ the chuckles & scoffs at the notion that all niggers cd sing & dance/ & most of us can sing & dance/ & the reason that so many plays written to silence & stasis fail/ is cuz most black people have some music & movement in our lives. we do sing & dance. this is a cultural reality. this is why i find the most inspiring theater among us to be in the realms of music & dance.[315]

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[313] Shange, ix.

[314] Shange, ix.

[315] Shange, x.

The reality here is that Shange is referring to a different use of the musicality of Black life; not in the traditional form as had become common for Blacks in the American theatre as constructed by immigrant White men. Her concern is for a newer and truer Black tradition of the intergration of song and dance within an African philosophical theatrical existance. This is a new version of an older African tradition of total theatre as explained by Paul Carter Harrison in his 1989 essay, "Black Theatre in the African Continuum: Word/song as Method."[316]

Harrison was the editor of the Kuntu Drama anthology, first published in 1974. In 1989 he produced another anthology; this one titled Totem Voices: Plays From the Black World Repertory, which included works by Black writers, including Shange, that provided more depth of meaning and illustrated larger posibilities of the Kuntu concepts. In Harrison's introduction to Totem Voices, "Black Theatre in the African Continuum: Word/Song as Method," he discusses the study of African philosophical systems as "crucial to an understanding of the aesthetics of black cultures (including the black cultures of the New World, which are essentially Afrocentric in their aesthetic sensibility)."[317] In Harrison's theoretical essay he

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[316] Harrison, "Black Theatre in the African Continuum: Word/Song as Method," Totem Voices: Plays from the Black World Repertory, New York: Grove Press 1989, xi-lxiii.

explains the importance of the word, or song, or sound and the meaning of the African Kuntu concept of Nommo force or the force and power of the spoken word. Here he explains a study by W. E. Abrahams[318] of the Akan system of thought[319] which points out that:

> man/woman is an "encapsulated spirit," the materialization of the nonmaterial; and since spirit is a constant element in the nature of man/woman, it is irreducible, though it is often manipulated or profaned by the conceits and capricies of the material world. "The physical world, . . . seems valuable only as spirit's exemplification or repository. And spirit subtly becomes intelligence, or mind . . . [this] philosophico-theological *historia* is an aesthetic one, one . . . which . . . seeks terms for the arrangement and synthesis of experience derived from perception."[320]

In other words, spirit is an ingrained part of material human beings. The physical body is nothing more than a manifestation of that spirit or soul. The release and exposure of intuitive knowledge and emotions from the inner soul allows intellectual development of the individual spirit and provides spiritual gifts or insights to the physical/material world. Since drama is an outlet for the

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[317] Harrison, "Word/Song," xiii.

[318] Harrison, "Word/Song," xiii. Harrison quotes W. E. Abrahams in The Mind of Africa, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1962.

[319] Akan is a form of the Kwa language spoken over a wide area of Ghana and extending into the Ivory Coast. Akan speaking peoples include the Akim, Akwapin, Ashanti and Fanti.

[320] Harrison, "Word/Song," xiii. Within this quote, Harrison quotes J. B. Danquah in The Akan Doctrine of God, Africana Modern Library 2nd ed., 2, London: Frank Cass and Company, 1968.

expression of emotions and insights, it follows that exposure of the African-American spirit, empowered by ancestral and cosmic relations of the African continuum, might be able through drama to provide luminous spiritual knowledge and awareness for the present material world. This is directly related to the Kuntu element of divination and also to Shange's aim and purpose in her "independently created afro-american aesthetic." Harrison further contends that the dramatic depth of the African-American aesthetic spirit is best explored through sacred experience as we have come to know it in the Black Church:

> since most people of African descent are first and foremost responsive to spiritual values, even when they are not affiliated with organized religion. Few blacks in the Americas are able to resist the groundswell of feeling and transport when the spirit is aroused in the formal exercises called church. Irrespective of affiliation - Holiness, African Methodist Episcopal, Baptist, Pentecostal in Puerto Rico, Candomble in Brazil, Macumba in Cuba, Pocomania in Jamaica, even Catholic or conservative Presbyterian - profound spiritual feelings cannot be suppressed "when the Saints come marchin' in"! And while the church experience may appear to be unchanged in form, the execution of the ritual is never static or otherwise predictable, largely due to the irrepressible magical incantations of the preacher's performance style.. . . such an exercise, at least in form, should be a natural source of inspiration for the secular ritual we call theatre.[321]

In this way Harrison makes clear his agreement with DuBois, that spiritual awareness is an essential element in the

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[321] Harrison, "Word/Song," xv.

formation of a Black-ground and framework for artistic and theoretical existence and evaluation. Calling on Baraka to further explain a musical connection to this spiritually-informed approach, Harrison quotes his contemporary who acknowledges the Euro-Western oppositional aesthetic viewpoint:

> You'll find [a] contrast between say, the dionysian [sic] mode which is African, a complete emotional outlet, whether it's Black church or Black art . . . as opposed to the apollonian [sic] kind of Post-Greek, European approach where it's restraint. Nietzche goes so far as to say life has to be kept separate from art because you might get too excited, it might stop you from being able to think. We look at them as two extremes, in that sense. I think that what the Afro-American has always been trying to evolve is an art that comes out of the basically dionysian, basic African spirit possession, because the Black church has always been about spirit possession. You know, they say the spirit will not descend without song. So you got to have music to make the spirit come down, and you gotta get the spirit, you gotta actually get the frenzy, you gotta get happy like they say, to actually have participated in that religious experience.[322]

Baraka contrasts Eurocentric and Afrocentric approaches to theatre and justifies an active and participatory (Dionysian) mode in opposition to stasis.

While agreeing with Abrahams' emphasis on the importance of emotional release to the development of Afrocentric artistic spirit within a Black-ground, Baraka also points out the Eurocentric proclivity for conservatism

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[322] Harrison, "Word/Song," xvi. Harrison quotes Amiri Baraka from an interview in The Drum, 1-2 (1987): 16-17.

and restraint. Baraka indicates the importance of music and dance or frenzy to the theatrical experience in the Black-ground. The connection of spirit to music and dance is not a new one. Music and dance have been a major part of African modes of performances and rituals since ancient times, including the African influenced Greek Theatre. Music, song and dance were definite elements of the origins of the American minstrel tradition. Now we may begin to see ever more clearly the sacredness of the slave acts in contrast to the misappropriation of these acts by Whites.

The connection of spirit to music and dance in an African-American dramatic context, however, had its theoretical foundation with DuBois who spoke of the spiritual and musical aspect and relevance to Black life as far back as 1903 in The Souls of Black Folk. But as the twenty-first century arrives, there is a need to project a newer consciousness based on present understanding of past knowledge and experiences.

The present epoch in the development of African-American theatre must be considered within the larger frame of present time, considered the postmodern era. We now see the beginnings of what might be called a Post-Revolutionary Black Theatre perspective, in accordance with the development of the present postmodern era.

In order to understand the notion of a Post-Revolutionary Movement for African-American theatre it may

be helpful to first understand three competing discursive formations of African-American dramatic practice. Tejumola Olaniyan, in a paper delivered in 1991 titled "Difference, Differently," identifies these formations in the context of a collective Black theatre (African, African-American and Caribbean) dramatic practice for the coming era. He labels these formations:

> the hegemonic, colonialist EUROCENTRIC discourse, the counter-hegemonic, anticolonialist AFROCENTRIC discourse, and an emerging POST-AFROCENTRIC discourse that subverts both the EUROCENTRIC and the AFROCENTRIC, while refining and advancing the aims of the latter.[323]

Simply stated the three formations are the Eurocentric, the Afrocentric, and the Post-Afrocentric which we shall relate to the Post-Revolutionary in regard to the Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement already explained.

By Olaniyan's explanation, the Eurocentric discourse is defined as that which utilizes standards of Western (European and/or White American) traditions as largely established by proponants of the eighteenth century philosophical movement known as The Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason. This discourse asserts or implies that there is no such thing as indigenous traditions as related

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[323] Tejumola Olaniyan, "Difference, Differently," (Part of a work in progress titled Performing Subjectivities: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama), Department of English, University of Virginia. Unpublished paper presented at The Institute for Advanced Study and Research in the African Humanities, Northwestern University 1991, 2.

to the aesthetics of Black drama. It assumes that any dramatic tradition that may call itself Black is nothing more than a developing imitation of Western forms and traditions. It holds fast to the hegemonic concept of the ideological dominance of a controlling elite class. The Eurocentric discourse will only legitimize "other" forms that exhibit elements of "universality" as defined by its own traditions and viewpoints.

The counter-hegemonic, Afrocentric, discourse is a relativistic concept which is in constant direct opposition to Eurocentric ideology. The Afrocentric discourse insists "on privileging the presence, point of view, and self-determination of Africans, Continental or Diasporan."[324] Its major objective is to define and empower itself as worthy (if not more worthy) of being, as compared to the Eurocentric, which it sees as arrogant, condescending, and evil. The Afrocentric discourse is generally in binary polarity with the Eurocentric. It is fostered by metaphysics rather than positivism, and spirituality rather than materialism. It is revolutionary, nativistic and nationalistic, and is propelled by an aggressive combative urge to free the identifiable self from the danger of abusive physical or ideological attack. Within its own discourse it is clearly related to the philosophical

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[324] Olaniyan, 2.

tradition of the American Revolutionary Black Theatre. However, by its very nature the Afrocentric discourse has a built-in preoccupation with the Eurocentric which is ultimately more destructive rather than productive to the pragmatic purposes of African-American Theatre.

Olaniyan provides an explanation of the emerging potentials of a Post-Afrocentric discourse when he writes of the major distinguishing characteristic of this Movement. He states that the Post-Afrocentric discourse is:

> a more or less singular insistence on working through the excessive manichaeism [duality] of the Eurocentric and Afrocentric discourses and affirming instead the more difficult foundational premise of an irreversible imbrication of histories between Europe and Africa. . . this premise is "more difficult" because it displaces, and is incompatible with the easy, smug satisfaction of a binary apprehension. What it suggests is an agonistic terrain, proposed as <u>shared</u> but from which a distinct identity must nevertheless be forged, for the sharing is in grossly unequal terms. It is thus a zone of the most complex, challenging, and dynamic conceptions of difference; a zone of endless critical questioning which subverts the <u>culturalist</u> notion of difference that animates <u>both</u> the Eurocentric and Afrocentric differences: an issue of an eternal white=civilized against black=barbaric; or in some passionate Afrocentric voices, a case simply of a "white aesthetic" against a "black aesthetic," all with a more or less. . .quiet disregard for, or a hazy comprehension of, the complexity of their own enabling conditions. The post-Afrocentric discourse not only quests for different representations but also,

> simultaneously, queries the representation of difference.[325]

In other words, the histories of Europe and Africa are so entwined that it is fruitless and fatal not to focus on the commonalties of human existence rather than the polarities which separate European and African talents. This allows for an expressive freedom which stems from the personal spirit and experiences of each individual soul.

The totality of experience which makes us individual is that essence of "difference" in each of us. Thus, the world can only be enriched from the inclusion of the many and varied "different" perspectives within the potential of this "openness of possibilities." As complex as such a quest may seem, the potential results promise alternative revelations to ideologies that continue to dominate both White and Black aesthetics of the past. The Post-Afrocentric (in our case, Post-Revolutionary) discourse is an emerging force resulting from the simultaneous dialectical convergence and opposition of the White Eurocentric and the Black Afrocentric discourses.

Olaniyan points out that what is needed is recognition and acceptance of the distinctive elements of each and recognition and acceptance of the inescapable conditions which bind the two polarities. In other words, the existence of each is reliant on the other and therefore is

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[325] Olaniyan, 3.

part of a perpetual cycle of complex negative actions, reactions and abreactions[326] which undermine the positive development of either. It is thus necessary to see the differences between the two realms of thought in a different, more positive, way. Consequently, the need to (re)identify and (re)define the African-American theatrical image, as well as the aesthetic which personifies that image, is paramount.

Challenging Eurocentric rationalization, restraint and high culture was one of the primatry aims of the Revolutionary Black Aesthetic Movement in the United States and the Black Revolutionary Theatre was that part of the Movement designed to illustrate and articulate the ills of White society. The aim, then, of a Post-Revolutionary Movement is to decenter the particular Euro-American-inspired victimization and assault narratives of "The Revolution." The focus no longer needs to center on Eurocentric valuation or acceptance. The concerns of "the man" should no longer consume the artistic energies of progressive intelligence.

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[326] Abreaction is a Freudian term used in cultural studies to describe a moment of affective discharge in which the emotions attached to a traumatic event are purged, either through the repetition of that event or in therapy. The production of an abreaction, which usually takes the form of fear or expressions of violence, is thus a crucial means of treating neurosis. A simple layman's definition might be explained as; revolt against some form of oppression which has been repressed and is thus released by the conscious or unconscious emotional memory which caused the original trauma. From, Childers and Hentzi, 1.

The Post-Revolutionary quest is to move beyond the spiritually and intellectually consuming discourse of the binary polar concerns of anti-Eurocentric revolution into the mind-expanding realm of living the positive and possible aspects of the African-American self. Cornel West, in "Decentering Europe: The Contemporary Crisis in Culture,"[327] explains that the neo-traditions of a Post-Revolutionary Movement will call for:

> a new generation of black intellectuals, self-confident, no longer anxiety-ridden, no longer looking for the kind of approval and legitimacy in the eyes of their white peers, but willing to flex their intellectual muscles and move in whatever directions and trajectories that they choose. It is a very new movement, a very new movement of black intellectual life.[328]

This is the same as Olaniyan's concept for the aims of a Post-Afrocentic awareness. West asserts that the new theories of Post-Revolutionary aesthetics will call for new ways of thinking and new alliances in the mobilization of meanings and structures of domination. He expresses a need for enlightened focus and a new kind of intellectual revolution when he states:

> The Marxisms, the feminisms, the various anti-racist, anti-homophobic forms of social theory begin to come back with power, and we're concerned with the degree to which operations of power are still hidden, are still concealed. . .

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[327] Cornel West, "Decentering Europe: The Contemporary Crisis in Culture (a memorial lecture for James Snead)," Critical Quarterly 33.1, Spring 1991, 1-19.

[328] West, 2.

> the one way of beginning to come to terms with this is having to historicise and pluralise and contextualise the postmodernism debate. . .and try to come to terms with what precisely is at stake.[329]

West feels that "issues of difference, of marginality, of otherness, of alternity and subalternity, of being subjugated and subordinated" are important parts of the problematics of postmodernism that make it "a profoundly American phenomenon,"[330] and possibly a profoundly pragmatic opening for the kind of cosmic insights that a Post-Revolutionary Black Theatre might provide. West sees postmodernism as:

> a set of responses due to the decentering of Europe - of living in a world that no longer rests upon European hegemony and domination in the political and economic, military and cultural dimension which began in 1492.[331]

The decentering of Europe and the domination of Eurocentric ideologies allows for less need of oppositional purpose as was the primary aim of the Afrocentric Movement. Post-Revolutionism, then, is a particular set of responses to the decentering of Eurocentric values as the dominant philosophy of America.

The saturation of American culture with Eurocentric values and sensibilities set in place institutional

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[329] West, 3.

[330] West, 5.

[331] West, 6.

apparatuses which now must be reshaped. West sees the postmodern debate as a cultural debate, since cultural artists are "the true apostles of equality." He also sees cultural tradition as something that cannot be inherited but must be obtained by great labor. Forging a neo-traditional-Post-Revolutionary aesthetic out of the postmodern discourse will indeed be a great and, as Olaniyan reminds, agonizing labor. It is a task that must be accomplished first within the confines of the Black-ground then transmuted into the larger realm of the spiritual universe.

The creation and development of such an aesthetic is a highly complex challenge that must first be concerned with clearing a space for its own imaginative experimentation and discovery. In its marginal and developmental stage, the Post-Revolutionary discourse personifies radical and militant characteristics of the Black Revolutionary/ Black Arts tradition brimming with the excitement and insightful pioneering nature of the Harlem Renaissance. Finally, it must be a means by which the uniqueness of the African-American soul can speak to all humankind and illustrate its multi-dimensional depth of character and insight with positive purpose.

Possibly the most exciting example of the ideology and potential of a Post-Revolutionary African-American Theatre in practice today, is the work of a young African-American

female dramatist, Suzan-Lori Parks. Parks is a postmodern artist by any and all standards with a concern for deconstructing "both the mythic history of the black experience and the history of America."[332] She also personifies West's call for "a new generation of black intellectuals . . . willing to flex their intellectual muscles." Her plays have been called - "incomprehensible" and "perplexing" by some.[333] Yet, according to Elinor Fuchs, "Parks's nonlinearity asks an important question. Where has linear history and all its narratives (Progress, Civilization, etc.) gotten the black man?"[334]

Parks is an example of what Paul Carter Harrison refers to as African-American Theatre's 1990s "dramaturgical preference for expressionistic works."[335] Harrison points out what appears to be a burgeoning trend for African-American artists, in addition to Parks, devoted to experimentation with such different styles as the nonlinear, testimonial approach of George Wolfe's Colored Museum, or August Wilson's narrative technique, "which

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[332] John Heilpern, "Voices from the Edge," Vogue, 183:11, November 1993, 174.

[333] Elinor Fuchs, "The Politics of Form," Village Voice, 37:15, April 14, 1992, 110. Fuchs, refers to reviews in Variety and the Hartford Courant respectfully, concerning the Yale Rep production of The Last Black Man.

[334] Fuchs, "The Politics of Form," 110.

[335] Harrison, "The (R)evolution of Black Theatre," American Theatre, 6:7 (October 1989), 31-32 & 116-118.

bridges realism with the nonreal, parabolic wisdom of African-American folk mythology."[336] While Parks is concerned with both nonlinearity and African-American folk mythology, her sense of reality is also unique. She follows the trend started by Shange and goes further than both Wolfe and Wilson in her imaginative rejection of traditional narrative and naturalistic forms. Parks prefers that the people or personalities in her plays be called "figures" rather than characters. The multi-dimentional aspect of these figures is that they are representative "signs of something and not people just like people we know."[337] Parks feels that figures as signs give a play epic scope. She explains, that often it is the case for figures in her plays that:

> one stands for a thousand. Epic is a state of existence which, I think, comes very naturally out of the day-to-day African American existence - we're a people who are often honored or damned because of the actions of one of our group. One of us stands for all of us. Those are epic stakes.[338]

For Parks then, the figures in her plays are often reappropriations of Western European conceived images of Black stereotypes with a bit more regard for their present

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[336] Harrison, "(R)evolution" 117.

[337] Lee A. Jacobus. "Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks," Bedford Introduction to Drama, ed. Lee A. Jacobus. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press 1993, 1372.

[338] Jacobus, 1372.

and potential purpose and meaning. Parks's contributions to Post-Revolutionary aesthetics is also evident in her attack on Eurocentric form and structure. She has this trait in common with Shange. Here she explains:

> There has always been a tendency in theatre to favor naturalism over non-naturalism, and this problem feeds directly into what is considered African-American theatre. I'm getting more interested in form and less interested in what critics love for blacks to write about - "the black experience."[339]

In this regard Parks follows a similar path established by Shange, who was much attacked by critics during her early development for a blatant disregard of Eurocentric standards of form and structure in her work. Shange's experimentation with form led to the creation of a new style known as the choreopoem. Parks's concern with form and the politics of form leads her into still uncharted territories. She explains:

> I think artists who are not from the dominant culture are the best ones to examine form. The question of form runs parallel to the question of the way the world is set up. If you are questioning form in theatre then you are questioning the form of the world.[340]

This statement is in agreement with DuBois's theory of "second sight" and the ability to see the world through different eyes. Parks also borrows another trait from

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[339] Cathy Madison. "Writing Home: Interviews with Suzan-Lori Parks, Christopher Durang, Eduardo Machado, Ping Chong and Migdalia Cruz," American Theatre, 8:7 (October 1991) p. 36.

[340] Madison, 36.

Shange in the process of examining new forms; a special interest in language.

Parks claims to hear language as well as see it, and therefore, her concerns with language includes speech as well as the language of gesture or movement. Like Shange, Parks prefers to "spell words as she wants them to be heard and signifies meanings that sometimes transcend the limits of individual words. . .and the result is a new word. The effect is both ironic and rhythmically powerful and reinforcing."[341] Irony and rhythm are also traits in common with Shange.

Irony in the works of both of these artists aligns them with the postmodern realm, and poetic rhythm is a common trait that provides them with a sense of bonded purpose. For Shange, rhythm is related to musicality and movement in her work. This fact is evident in her use of the term "choreopoem." Parks explains her use of rhythm and musicality of language when she discusses the importance of soul singer James Brown in her work. She says:

> The great thing about James Brown is that he shows that language involves the body. Sometimes James Brown will say "Aah! Hit me!" and you don't understand exactly what he's saying but you're dancing anyway. So, you could say that James Brown has affected my theatre work - my sense of music and vocalization. If

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[341] Jacobus, 1353-1354.

> anything about theatre is ethnically specific I guess language is, and I think that African-Americans share a history of having fun with language. We never forget that words have a lot of power.[342]

Parks's understanding of the connection of rhythm-music-movement allows her to move into other levels of development with form. The mentioned connections to other African-American theatre dramatists reveal a tradition of alternative expressiveness that serves to distinguish them from a mainstream of Eurocentric dominated traditions of form and structure. But the goal here is to illustrate an example of a Movement that goes beyond the Negro, Afrocentric, African-American, and the Eurocentric traditions.

Parks's philosophy illustrates the broad scope of awareness and potential for artists in the realm of a Post-Revolutionary Movement. She has an ability to serve the Post-Revolutionary function to "go beyond the subject matter, beyond the characters, beyond the plot, to a kind of world view made up of cultural history, a family history and a personal history which I think a lot of African-Americans share."[343] Her sense of going beyond is expressed in several ways. First, plot and theme for Parks are open areas for experimentation and examination. She explains:

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[342] Madison, 37.

[343] Madison, 37.

> Because of a shameful past, . . . there's an equation from both whites and blacks that automatically goes: Black people are *oppressed.* [sic] There are some wonderful plays about the black struggle - but is that all we get to write about? There's another equation, I think. And that's what I'm interested in. How about black people, *period*? [sic] What if you remove the racial tension for a moment? What, then, is the drama and what kind of theatre does it make? Maybe really weird theatre! But I'm trying to remove the straitjacket.[344]

Others might agree that what results from Parks's experimentation is indeed, "really weird theatre!" But her statement and her plays are wonderful examples of Post-Revolutionary philosophy in practice.

In trying to figure out the drama of African-American life with the tensions of race removed for a moment, she makes use of the postmodern device of repetition and revision. Words, phrases and even entire segments of scenes are repeated over and over again with slight variations. Parks's plays also avoid "well made" structure of the clearly defined beginning-middle-end. The audience's sense of history and intellect is necessary to make the linear connections, relative to their own awareness of time and space. Parks states that her personal concern is with the phenomenon of moving through time and space.

In one of her plays, The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World, Parks dissects the image of

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[344] Heilpern, 174, 176.

African-Americans in much the same way that Adrienne Kennedy did in her early works, the way Wolfe did in The Colored Museum, and the way Shange did in a piece like Spell #7. The progressive difference is that the aforementioned artists have blazed a trail which allows for a new generation of African-American dramatists to move into newer directions and trajectories, and work within a world of neo-traditions based on freedom of expression rather than an identity chained to an ideology of victimization and oppression.

The new potential of African-American theatre lies in the ability of its artists to capitalize on this new expressive freedom. This, then, is the aim and task of a Post-Revolutionary theatre: to open new vistas to the African-Amerian mind, and open the world to the vistas of African-American imagination, moving humanity into new realms of awareness.

In 1995, Parks published her personal aesthetic principles as an introduction to her anthology, The America Play and Other Works.[345] These principles appear in the form of three unique essays; "Posession," "From 'Elements of Style,'" and "An Equation for Black People Onstage." In the first brief essay, she begins by defining the word "possession."

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[345] Suzan-Lori Parks, The America Play and Other Works, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995.

> possession. 1. the action or fact of possessing, or the condition of being possessed. 2. the holding or having of something as one's own, or being inhabited and controlled by a demon or spirit.[346]

This definition denotes a new way of looking at bi-polarity. It expresses the identification of a situation and the impetus to take action, to do something proactive. The definition and the essay itself express this young dramatist's need to (re)identity and (re)create her art her own way, much like Shange. Parks sets out with a particular task in mind; to use history as ground for her artistic focus. She explains:

> Theatre is the place which best allows me to figure out how the world works. What's going on here. . . . The history of Literature is in question. And the history of History is in question too. A play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature. Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to "make" history - that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to - through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life - locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.[347]

Here is an author who understands the possibilities of the art of theatre. She understands the magical power of being

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[346] Parks, 3.

[347] Parks, 4.

able to (re)create the self and present a new and better way of seeing. She says this very clearly when she writes:

> The bones tell us what was, is, will be; and because their song is a play - something that through a production actually happens - I'm working theatre like an incubator to create "new" historical events. I'm re-membering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history. Theatre is an incubator for the creation of historical events - and, as in the case of artificial insemination, the baby is no less human.[348]

Parks also understands the connection and use of the African continuum and the process and power of divination. She includes in her essay the African religious philosophy of John S. Mbiti, who explains:

> *A person dies and yet continues to live: he is a living-dead, and no other term can describe him better than that. . . . The living dead are bilingual . . . and speak in nasal tones. They belong to the time period of the Zamani [past] and by entering individuals in the Sasa [present] period, they become our contemporaries. The state of possession and mediumship is one of contemporarizing the past, bringing into human history the beings essentially beyond the horizon of present time.*[349]

Here is an artist who understands the potential talked about for many years but never fully realized. That is the potential of African-American theatre to (re)write time and (re)create history by telling it from the perspective of

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[348] Parks, 4-5.

[349] Parks, 5. Italics is from Parks and is representative of her writing style.

those who have seen it from the bottom up, from a different perspective. The view and the vision is expressed with new insight and the future that follows this way of being and way of seeing is also open to new possiblilities. She is taking possession of the self, the past, the present and laying open a new future.

In the essay, From "Elements of Style," Parks explains her style in order to allow potential directors and performers "a way in - so that instead of calling me up they can, with this 'guide,' dive into an examination with great confidence."[350] This essay also discusses her concern for what she calls, "Theatre of Schmaltz," which for her is mostly about "stating some point, or tugging some heartstring, or landing a laugh, or making a splash, or wagging a finger." Parks is a playwright who takes nothing for granted, not even the traditions of the art form of play writing. She explains:

> This essay is intended primarily for the new generation of theatre makers.. . .this splendid artform - an art that is not "poor film" or "cheap TV" but an art so specific and strange in its examination of the human condition - depends not only on the older guard but also on those of us who are relative newcomers. . . . There are many ways to challenge ourselves as theatre artists. Here are some ideas, feelings, thoughts, takes on the world, riffs, ways of approaching the word, the page, the event, the subject, the stage, that keep me *awake*. [sic][351]

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[350] Parks, 6.

[351] Parks, 7.

From this point in the essay, she presents a series of short statements about the elements that inspire her new form of writing for the theatre. These elements include: theatre, form and content, repetition and revision, etymology, ghost, math, bad math, the NEA hoopla, history, dance, humor, action in the line, sex, a (rest), a spell, foreign words & phrases, language is a physical act, opening night. She explains her meaning and usage of each element. This essay is a literal guide to reading, understanding and staging her plays.

The last of the essays, "An Equation for Black People Onstage," is the written theoretical essay that gives Parks a place in the history of dramatic theory for African-American theatre. In this essay Parks states her opinion on the nature of the Black-White oppositional polarity that has for years dominated most Black plays and playwrights.

In her explanation of an alternative to such a fixed purpose for African-American writers she supports and echoes the notion of a need for a Post-Revolutionary aesthetic. In fact, she practically writes such an aesthetic. She begins:

> The bulk of relationships Black people are engaged in onstage is the relationship between the Black and the White other. This is the stuff of high drama. I wonder if a drama involving Black people can exist without the presence of the White - no, not the *presence* [sic]- the presence is not the problem. As Toni Morrison writes in her essay "Black Matters," the presence of the White often signifies the

> presence of the Black. Within the subject is its other. So the mere *presence* [sic] of the other is not the problem. The interest of the other is.[352]

Here Parks restates Olaniyan's premise of the nature of the Afrocentric or Revolutionary discourse to overlook its own potentials because of preoccupation with combating Eurocentric concerns and ideologies. Parks makes clear her unconcern for the White "other" and her focus on the possiblilities within her own realm of thinking and being. She writes:

> The use of the White in the dramatic equation is, I think, too often seen as the only way of exploring our Blackness; this equation reduces Blackness to merely a state of "non-Whiteness." Blackness in this equation is a people whose lives consist of a series of reactions and responses to the White ruling class. We have for so long been an "oppressed" people, but are Black people only blue? As African-Americans we have a history, a future and a daily reality in which a confrontation with a White ruling class is a central feature. This reality makes life difficult. This reality often traps us in a singular mode of expression. There are many ways of defining Blackness and there are many ways of presenting Blackness onstage. The Klan does not always have to be outside the door for Black people to have lives worthy of dramatic literature. Saying that "Whitey" has to be present in Black drama because Whitely is an inextricable aspect of Black reality is like saying that every play has to have a murder in it, is like saying that every drama involving Jews must reference Treblinka. And what happens when we choose a concern other than the race problem to focus on? What kind of drama do we get?[353]

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[352] Parks, 19.

[353] Parks, 19-20.

Then, she makes diagramed equations to represent the clearity of her position:

> BLACK PEOPLE + "WHITEY" =
> STANDARD DRAMATIC CONFLICT
> (STANDARD TERRITORY)
>
> *i.e.* [sic]
>
> "BLACK DRAMA" = the presentation of the Black as oppressed
> so that
> WHATEVER the dramatic dynamics, they are most often READ to EQUAL an explanation or relation of Black oppression. This is not only a false equation, this is bullshit.
> so that
> BLACK PEOPLE + x = NEW DRAMATIC CONFLICT
> (NEW TERRITORY)
>
> *where x is the realm of situations showing African-Americans in states other than the oppressed by/ obsessed with "Whitey" state; where the White when present is not the oppressor, and where audiences are encouraged to see and understand and discuss these dramas in terms other than that same old shit.*[354]

Now her premise is clear. This is a new generation writer for a new kind of African-American Theatre. Parks is an innovator, taking the lead in the realm of new possibilities. She ends this essay with four questions and a bit of prophetic pragmatisim of her own:

> Can a White person be present onstage and not be an oppressor? Can a Black person be onstage and be other than oppressed? For the Black writer, are there Dramas other than race dramas? Does Black life consist of issues other than race issues? And gee, [sic] there's another thing: There is no such thing as THE [sic] Black Experience; that is, there are many experiences

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[354] Parks, 20. Italics by Parks. The odd shape of the quote is another representation of her unique and rebellious writing style.

> of being Black which are included under the rubric. . . . I'm continually encouraging myself to explore The-Drama-of-the-Black-Person-as-an-Integral-Facet-of-the-Universe. This exploration takes me, in a very organic way, into new territory; because, in encouraging myself to listen to the stories beyond my default stories - because the story determines the shape of the play - the play assumes a new structure. . . . As there is no single "Black Experience," there is no single "Black Aesthetic" and there is no one way to write or think or feel or dream or interpret or be interpreted. . . . We should endeavor to show the world and ourselves our beautiful and powerfully infinite variety.[355]

This is new age thinking by a new age African-American artist. This is the kind of freedom of thought and insight that the Negro/ Black/ African-American theatre seems to have aspired to for a bit more than a century of questing for an identity. Here is an offering of something insightful, independently created, with much positive potential. Now African-American theatre appears to have a way to look at the past with present perspective, toward a new, different and better future.

A Post-Revolutionary African-American aesthetic should be explored and developed independently of the common-ground because of the historical "grossly unequal terms" mentioned by Olaniyan. The development of such an aesthetic is a highly complex challenge that must first be concerned with clearing a space for its own imaginative experimentation and discovery. In its marginal and

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[355] Parks, 21-22.

developmental stage, the Post-Revolutionary discourse personifies radical and militant characteristics of the Black Revolutionary tradition brimming with the excitement and insightful pioneering nature of the Harlem Renaissance. Finally, it should be a means by which the uniqueness of the African-American soul can speak to all humankind and illustrate its multi-dimensional depth of character.

In the quest to find the universal nature of the African-American character some will question the possible loss of distinctive identity and personality. But a loss of personal identity in the quest for a universal consciousness within this discourse is contradictory to its true purpose. Rather, "difference" is an admired essential and worthy of praise. The aim of the discourse is to allow difference to be viewed differently. At the same time, the goal is to appreciate and celebrate a common spiritual connection by using the means of difference to show the commonness of humanity in the form of universal spirit.

Artists must use their "difference" to illustrate to their different factions (identity groups) the fruitless and fatal ramifications of total separatism (including elitism, homophobia, nationalism, racism, religion, sexism) and move them toward a common-ground of humanity. Thus, it remains important to maintain factional or identity group cultural traditions in order to bring enlightening insights into the universal sphere of spiritual purpose.

Within the Post-Revolutionary discourse the space clearing act is not for self-indulgent egocentric purposes. The clearing becomes a larger open terrain where all cultures and discourses may develop a new all-inclusive tradition, a tradition without what we now understand as "others." In the new tradition the "other" becomes the past; the "other tradition" of limitation, separation and discord. The Post-Revolutionary discourse is a new world order, a realm of hope and sharing. It is not without Eurocentric or Afrocentric value or tradition - it is of them both, necessarily, by history.

A Post-Revolutionary African-American aesthetic should aim to strengthen the bridge (or hyphen) between the two extremes of the Afrocentric (African) and the Eurocentric (American). It should be connective tissue which fuses the two previously polar philosophies within a not yet seen theoretical framework making it possible to understand the unique hybrid nature of Africans as Americans and African-American theatre as an all encompassing element of American theatre. Thus, the new aesthetic becomes the basis of a gestalt which expresses African-American dramatic identity as a cathartic abreaction[356] of inherent artistic potential. It changes the dynamic of "all Black folk can sing and

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[356] The release or acting out of repressed emotions. (See earlier note 326 for fuller definition which is used for new purpose at this time.)

dance" to, "there are great possibilities of inherent dramatic potential in the backgrounds and experiences of African-American people." Just as it was at the theoretical founding of the institution of Negro/ Black/ African-American theatre, dramatic potential once again becomes the major racial contribution toward a collective universal perspective of human intelligence and spirituality.[357]

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[357] See discussion in Chapter III, on the Harlem Renaissance aim for a Negro Theatre with potential to expose these same potentials as a founding philosophy for African-American Theatre beginning in the 1920s.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This study has been an historical overview of written essays, philosophies and manifestoes concerning the development of theatre about, by, for and near the hearts, minds and souls of African-Americans. Utilizing the investigative methodologies of cultural studies as tools for analysis, the study is essentially a social history of ideas. What has been revealed is that African-American theatre is an American sociocultural phenomenon which has served both public and private functions within the larger American society and that it is indeed a theatre born of historical conflict in constant search of an identity.

The aim of this study was to look at African-American theatre as subject rather than object of a cultural studies review. Therefore, greater concern with the private and underlying implications of this particular institution have been paramount. One of the objectives was to illustrate an evolved history of theoretical thought and demonstrate a

tradition of spiritual awareness, sensibility and purpose for the institution of African-American theatre in the United States.

This overview revealed a clear line of development with certain aspects emerging as essential elements or fundamentals which are important as aesthetic principles of African-American theatre. I conclude that there are five elements or aesthetic principles that are fundamental to African-American theatre. These include protest, revolt, assertion, music and spirituality.

Protest has been a necessary essential because of the originating negative and stereotypical theatrical image of African-Americans created during the minstrel era. Objection to the sustained efforts of the dominant society to present a constructed image of unreasonable and irrational beings in the form of buffoonish Black minstrel types is an on-going and necessary essential of African-American theatre.

Revolt as an essential element of African-American theatre represents a stand against ideological and physical attacks perpetrated against African-Americans throughout history. Artistic revolt fulfills a need to acknowledge and expressively contradict such acts. Assertion of an ideology of "otherness" and "difference" is also a necessary essential ingredient of African-American dramatic

aesthetics. This allows for the expression of alternative realities and presentation of positive images of the self.

Music as an essential of African-American theatre includes not only what is heard in terms of the lyrical and rhythmic nature of sound, but also the responsive nature of the spirit to the lyrical and rhythmical. Thus as an essential of African-American theatre the element of music includes both the call and the response, sound and movement - both music and dance. In this regard the two elements of sound and reaction become inseparable.

Spirituality in this regard is related to all elements of the cosmic spirit. Thus, spirituality includes the concepts of Kuntu, Nommo, magic, miracles, wishes, dreams, hopes, aspirations and beliefs in things unseeable by the material eye. It therefore requires an ability to see with the heart and with the soul, with the cosmic or third eye; to know in the spiritual sense requires understanding and utilization of systems of divination and a belief in what others might consider the impossible. It is the essential of deep feeling, emotion and passion. It allows for intuitive sensibility and is directly related to the essential of music and should provide an intellectual base for the essentials of protest, revolt and assertion.

By mapping a chronological development of writings on African-American theatre a list of seven periods or

developmental eras can be seen. The first of these is the plantation or slave period when Africans essentially provided the stimuli and motifs for what would become America's first indigenous theatrical form. Through careful reading of the phenomenon of American slavery in Chapter 2, I contend that the "entertainments" and coded performances by slaves were disguised ritual acts infused with personal spiritual meaning and purpose.

The appropriation of these slave acts by Whites led to the second period of African-American theatrical development. This was the minstrel era and it had profound impact on the entire American nation, both Black and White. The minstrel tradition created negative images and stereotypes of African-Americans. These stereotypes have lingered in the national consciousness of the country for more than one hundred and fifty years and helped to encode an institutional system of racism and a false sense of racial supremacy and superiority among the Whites.

The minstrel tradition itself is one of the greatest paradoxes in American history for several reasons. Chief among those reasons is the fact that it provided the first opportunity for Blacks to legally take to the professional performing stage, but they did so in the guises of White men who had imitated Black slaves in low comic forms creating the long standing stereotypes of Black clowns and buffoons.

Thus, African-American's entree to the theatre also provided the need to revolt against the minstrel form and assert themselves as human beings deserving of serious respect and acknowledgment for their artistic talents.

The need to assert a "new Negro" image brought on the third distinctive era of African-American Theatre. This was the Harlem Renaissance (or the New Negro Renaissance as it was also known). This period spanned the decade of the 1920s and is quite literally the philosophical founding era for African-American theatre aesthetics. This intellectual movement was led by W. E. B. DuBois, who wrote prolificly about the Negro's potential for serious theatrical artistry both as performers and subjects.

DuBois was editor of the important Crisis magazine of the NAACP which sponsored literary contests to stimulate the writing of plays by Negroes on themes of African-American life. During this time an ideological concern for plays of social protest and the assertion of a new identity of elevated style and intellectual recognition fueled the artistic energies of a new generation of African-Americans. In Chapter 3 a number of essays by DuBois are reviewed as well as those by the young man called "the Dean of the Harlem Renaissance," Alain Locke.

Locke edited the major cultural and literary manifesto of this era which was called The New Negro. Essays which

focused on the development of Negro theatre by teacher and scholar Montgomery Gregory and by the literary editor for The Crisis magazine Jessie Fauset are also discussed in Chapter 3.

The Harlem Renaissance was brought to an unfortunate close following the 1929 stock market crash. However, the 1930s saw the creation of the short lived but very important Federal Theatre Project (FTP) which flourished between 1935 and 1939. The FTP began the fourth era of African-American theatre development which I call the assimilationist period. The title given to this era must not overshadow the importance of the productive four years at its beginning. For it was during this time of the FTP that African-American theatre artists received their first opportunity for legitimate training in every aspect of theatrical arts.

Previous to the founding of the FTP, a part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration, the majority of Negro artists used their "natural talents" to gain notoriety and respect on the stage. What they were able to learn during the FTP would serve the development of African-American theatre for years to come following the Congressional closing of this national theatre movement in 1939.

The era is still considered assimilationist because it was dominated by attempts of Negro artists' to gain respect through traditional Eurocentric theatrical means. This meant Broadway for performers and the traditional forms of European inspired "well made" modern realist play structure for writers. This period saw the development of the first fully organized company of trained resident professional Black actors, appropriately named the American Negro Theatre (A.N.T.). This group and the entire period in which they were of major importance is discussed in Chapter 4. A.N.T. enjoyed success as a theatre company in both Harlem and on Broadway from 1940 to 1949.

The assimilationist era continued into the 1950s with Negroes in professional performance roles in Hollywood and on Broadway mostly as servants and slaves. Playwrights such as Alice Childress, William Branch, Louis Peterson and Charles Segree all had plays presented in New York's commercial arenas. All their plays were written in the style of modern realism. But the greatest glory and recognition came to Lorraine Hansberry's play A Raisin in the Sun (1958-59) which won critical acclaim and presented a spiritual preamble to the next major developmental moment, the revolutionary era.

The fifth era of development, the Black Power, Black Arts, Black Revolutionary era was possibly the most prolific period of Black theatre development to date. In

this period, beginning in the early to mid 1960s, the ideology of Black nationalism, Black consciousness and Black empowerment created a huge number of Black playwrights and theatre groups throughout the nation. Theorist and playwright Amiri Baraka wrote a major manifesto, "In Search of the Revolutionary Theatre," as well as a number of plays and founded theatre groups in Harlem and Newark.

This Revolutionary era brought back the ideas of protest, revolt and assertion introduced in the 1920s with radical power and purpose in the 1960s. Revolutionary Black theatre ideology also included spirituality, but it was a highly radical form of spirituality, what Baraka called "supremacy of spirit." Playwrights Ed Bullins and Ron Milner were also prominent dramatists of this era. They also wrote theoretical essays which helped to define the era. Their essays along with writings by playwright and activist Larry Neal are reviewed in Chapter 5. The discussion in this chapter also includes The Black Aesthetic, the major literary anthology of the Black Aesthetic Movement edited by Addison Gayle, Jr.

The ideology of Black nationalism which surfaced during the 1960s gave rise to philosophies of Afrocentrism. By the mid 1970s that sense of a psychological and philosophical return to Africa and things African had become vital to serious Black theatre aesthetics. It

provided the energy and focus that has propelled it into our present-day consciousness. Thus, I have named this sixth era ranging from the mid 1970s through the end of the 1980s the Revolutionary-Afrocentric era. It is marked by a return to African consciousness in the form of ritual based aesthetics. It is personified by the concepts of Kuntu and Nommo and associated and explained in the writings of dramatist and scholar Paul Carter Harrison. These concepts are discussed in the beginning of Chapter 6.

The seventh period or era takes African-American theatre into the twenty-first century. I call this the Post-Revolutionary era. It began as an outgrowth of both the revolutionary era and the Revolutionary-Afrocentric era and includes the present insights of postmodern intellectual spiritualism. This period is marked by protest and revolt in the form of new intellectualism and the mind expanding desire and capability to go beyond the limitations of the past. This ideology and aesthetic allows us to look at the past with learned perspectives of the present, leading the way into a new future. It utilizes the concepts of Kuntu (cosmic ancestral connection) and Nommo force (power of the spoken word), and understands the prophetic and pragmatic usage of "the Bokongo circle of life where the spirit is connected to earth in an endless circle with no top or bottom - only an endless continuum of expressive 'otherness' and inherent

knowledge."[358] This era of new possibilities is explained in the theoretical essays of Paul Carter Harrison, Ntozake Shange and Suzan-Lori Parks which are reviewed in Chapter 6.

One can only draw certain speculations or make declarations concerning aesthetic principles as to what might best serve the interest of African-American theatre in the approaching millennium of the twenty-first century. The seriousness of the need to make such speculations and declarations has been identified and initiated by another paradox of American theatrical realities, African-American playwright August Wilson.

According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., one of many concurring sources in this regard, Wilson "is probably the most celebrated American playwright now writing and is certainly the most accomplished black playwright in this nation's history."[359] Wilson aims to explore African-American life and history by writing plays set in each decade of the twentieth century. The particular paradox of Wilson is stated by Gates:

> August Wilson . . . is in some respects an unlikely spokesman for a new Black Arts movement. He neither looks nor sounds typically black - had he the desire, he could easily pass

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[358] From the opening fly sheet in Black Theatre's Unprecedented Times, ed. Hely M. Perez, Gainesville, FL: Black Theatre Network, 1999.

[359] Gates, "The Chitlin Circuit," The New Yorker, February 3, 1997, 44.

> - and that makes him black first and foremost by self-identification (His father was a German-American baker in Pittsburgh, where he grew up.)[360]

With the reality of mixed heritage, Wilson's self-identified Blackness does have significance. He is a significant catalyst for a Post-Revolutionary focus on the power and potential of self identification within the realities of multicultural arts. While Wilson speaks as a revolutionary in direct opposition to the general concepts of multiculturalism, he is actually a Post-Revolutionary philosopher in this regard because he reminds everyone of the need to acknowledge and identify the philosophical terrain on which one will stand and operate. Wilson says of himself and of his state of mind:

> the Black Power movement of the '60s was a reality; it was the kiln in which I was fired, and has much to do with the person I am today and the ideas and attitudes that I carry as part of my consciousness.[361]

Here Wilson identifies the aesthetic reality which he chooses to operate within. He is acknowledging his own spiritual reality. This makes him a Post-Revolutionary because he brings the past with him into the present realm with new insight and new expectation. He also brings new potentials and possibilities because he speaks <u>assertively</u>

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[360] Gates, "Chitlin Circuit," 46.

[361] August Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand," <u>American Theatre</u>, Vol. 13, No. 7 (September 1996), 14-15.

about Black theatre by way of his Black consciousness for the empowerment of Black arts, and this ideology is clearly near to his heart and soul.

The point I am making here may seem odd at first, but! The playfulness with which I make this point is indeed the point. In our present moment in time Wilson has artistic and ideological power, allocated by the cosmic energy that he commands. This power appears to come from the status that has been awarded to him by critics and awards committees and such. But I think it has more to do with the spirits of the African continuum, the powers of the spoken word and the power inherent in the consciousness and collective spiritual energy of this millennium moment.

Whether by direct intent or by accident, Wilson has ignited an energy that is now stirring within the collective community of African-American artists and that energy is very real and much more powerful than the larger positivist American society may realize. It may be more powerful than even Wilson realizes. His 1996 speech, "The Ground on Which I Stand," has reminded Black artists that what "was" is only as powerful and potentially as important as we make it today. We have to make it what "is." We must bring the past into the present drama of our lives as Ntozake Shange says (see page 198). We must put it into the circle and create a new temenos as Eleanor Traylor

might say (see page 43). Suzan-Lori Parks might say, "get out from under your own 'oppressiveness' - out from under victimization, this is the land and the home of those brave enough to free themselves. Don't you wanna - be all you can be, in the army of all possibilities."[362] Look back at page 219 and see what Parks really says in her definition of "possession."

The bravery that I must feel at this point to freely improvise in this most austere setting of the doctoral dissertation is exactly the point and possibility for African-American theatrical aesthetics in the twenty-first century. Is this pragmatic? I think so. Is it prophetic? God knows it is! Here is how one might understand such a reality.

As one of the "fortunate 45" invited to participate in the week-long closed sessions of the National Black Theatre Summit sponsored by Dartmouth College in March of 1998, I was called upon by the cosmic forces to be part of a special group of African-Americans connected to the theatre world in odd and different ways. The other directors and performers, playwrights and theatre administrators I mostly knew. The bankers and lawyers, managerial experts foundations folk I did not. But we found common ground and

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[362] This quote is the authors version of Parks's style of writing. It is used to illustrate the possible nature of expressive freedom in all forms of writing.

ways of communicating, helping each other focus on the purpose and the possibilities inherent in the moment of our presence in the time and space provided.

The full impact of the experiences produced in the events of that sequestered week in the woods of New Hampshire are now becoming clearer. As I draw conclusions from a study of aesthetic writing on the historical development of African-American theatre, a theatre born of historical conflict constantly struggling to find its way, its space, justifying itself over and over again, the reality of self empowerment and the understanding of one's intrinsic and inherent self worth are almost unexplainable. Yet the power of the Nommo force works its magic. This moment is real and overflowing with possibilities. That's drama at least seven dimensions thick and seven layers deep.

In the publication which reports the summit events of 1998, Wilson writes:

> Art is made up out of the spiritual resources of the people who create it. Out of their experiences, the sacred and the profane, is made a record of their traverse and the many points of epiphany and redemption. It empowers and provokes sense of self that speeds development and progress in all areas of life and endeavor.[363]

This passage helps me realize that my present task of writing is an artistic as well as a scholarly endeavor with

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[363] Wilson, "Introduction: In Our Hands," Black Theatre's Unprecedented Times, 32.

profound purpose. This act comes in part from the spiritual resources of a collective community of ancestors who provided the materials for evaluation and now linger and impact this moment. They inspire and encourage the work at hand through the revelations and insight they first set down on paper years ago.

I think of them now and I think of Parks's quote from John Mbiti; "A person dies and yet continues to live: . . . They belong to the time period of the Samani [past] and by entering individuals in the Sasa [present] period, they become our contemporaries."[364] Thus, we are an artistic community in this moment, DuBois, Locke, Gregory, Fauset, Wilson, Mbiti, Parks and I. We are a continuum.

The reality here is that none of us struggles alone. Because those in the past made a record of their traverse, their epiphanies and redemptive moments, we are all empowered in the present and in the future as we now add to the collective development of progress. Our community of theorists continues:

> We have begun the struggle anew. The moment is already in our hands. It is pregnant with possibilities that ennoble. Our collective muscle is no longer in danger of atrophy. It strengthens in its application of will. In the vast sea of culture it proclaims a society indebted to its own origins, its own willful contracts of duty and faith. It is we who decide whether our efforts bear fruit. It is in our hands. . . . We know all too well the

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[364] Parks, 5.

> consequences of the failure of our vigilance. We have ample proof of the dire circumstance that accompanies the failure of faith. It is we who are at the crossroads. The defining moment that parallels our future. This is the history that we are making. Each and every day.[365]

Now we struggle together from the present moment into the future of possibilities. The power of the past engergizes and invigorates the present and strengthens our will to consider new possibilities. With this new collective will to reconsider the full richness of our own origins and heritage our faith is renewed and reinforced.

The insights of our collective knowledge provides faith and abilities beyond our past and present limitations. Limitations that previously forced us to choose elitism over pragmatism can be replaced as we (re)construct history. The future of African-American theatre's survival can be strengthened by our (re)construction of shortsighted and philosophical errors of times gone by. With the collective connection to the continuum of spiritual knowledge we can be opened to the (re)visitation of our past, armed with the inherent potentials of prophetic pragmatism.

The need for (re)visitation of the past and (re)examination of the present is largely fueled by the ideological stuggle within the Black theatre community to address new issues of standards and practices. Samuel Hay

presents an interesting view of this problem in the article "Casting a Cold Eye on Things" as he explains:

> The history of Black theatre is replete with this exclusion business - from the Howard University president's refusal to let the Howard Players put on Willis Richardson's "propaganda" plays during the twenties, to similar situations in the sixties . . . The significance of this self-centeredness is that it goes to the heart of the question of what, really, is so ugly and distasteful that it should be excised from Black theatres. Or, what are the Black theatre philosophies of taste and beauty, its overwhelming of the senses and mind with imposing grandeur and humbling effect?[366]

Hay is speaking directly to the issue of exclusionary practices in regard to cutting edge Black theatre artists such as Keith Antar Mason, co-founder and artistic director of The Hittite Empire.[367] The fact that Mason's works have been neglected in the repertoires of most African-American theatre companies because of their boldness and their "incendiary rifts on racial oppression" brings to light a necessary discussion of the acceptable, the appreciated and the allowable in African-American theatrical aesthetics.

While I think it is right and proper to consider taste and beauty in regard to the aesthetics of African-American

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[365] Wilson, "In Our Hands," 33.

[366] Samuel A. Hay, "Casting a Cold Eye On Things," Black Theatre's Unprecedented Times, 115.

[367] The Hittite Empire is "a hard-hitting, in-your-face performance-artists collective based in Santa Monica, California." The group has performed at major experimental theatre festivals around the world and has done residencies in London and Mexico City as well as in many U. S. cities.

theatre, I also believe that it is possible to view these concerns within the realm of the history and heritage of a theoretical tradition of African-American theatrical aesthetics. The works of cutting edge Black theatre artists is an important part of what African-American theatre has been and should continue to be.

Hay goes on to discuss the nature of the Black audience and its desire for fun loving productions. Such productions are also a part of the past, present and future of African-American theatre. Such problems were discussed by DuBois, Matthews and Edmonds among other Black theorists in past years. By unveiling the insights and ideas of the past and utilizing the openness which is characteristic of the present theoretical moment I believe it is possible for the many and varied approaches to theatre about, by, and for African-Americans to find new development within a traditional theatrical Black-ground.

I suggest more serious analysis of the practical successes enjoyed by the "urban circuit genre" of productions (commonly referred to as the "chitlin' circuit"). Our willingness to do so has already been signaled by the reconfiguration of this practical conceptualization in the (re)dressing of the titles from "chitlin circuit" to "urban circuit plays." This (re)naming ritual is pregnant with potential. Beverly

Robinson explains the transformation from old to new in "The Urban Circuit Play: aka Chitlin Circuit":

> The term "Chitlin Circuit" reflects an earlier era of Black entertainment history. African-Americans devoted to their artistry (primarily music) performed despite (or in spite of) racism, poor working conditions, inadequate accommodations on the road, and meager wages. . . . This tradition actually began during the early 1900s and continued through the 1940s; for some, until the early 1950s. Contemporary urban plays are rooted out of different experiences. . . . The cultural custodians from other disciplines who find it necessary to use nomenclature of oppression by calling these modern productions "chitlin circuit plays," are historically incorrect. Furthermore, this unwarranted outside intervention is intellectually demeaning considering that theater is comprised of enough articulate voices to provide names for the genres within its field. If anything, *Urban Circuit Play* [sic] better reflects and complements the type of theater in question.[368]

When examined closely the "urban circuit genre" can be seen as a (re)appropriation of the minstrel tradition in its latter stages. It also parallels the successes of the Black musical comedy shows of the early twentieth century. While the quality of present productions in this mode is questionable, the potential of the genre illustrates elements of the independent identity which has been sought throughout the historical development of African-American theatre. It is a genre which is both prophetic and pragmatic.

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[368] Berverly Robinson, "The Urban Circuit Play: aka Chitlin Circuit," Black Theatre's Unprecedented Times, 85.

It is a prophetic genre because it is based in the spiritual tradition and heritage of the African-American life. The stories pit good characters against evil situations and end with resolutions of spiritual redemption. It is a pragmatic genre because it is theatre that supports and sustains itself. It follows the fundamentals of DuBois to the greatest extent. It is about, by, for and near the hearts, souls and spiritual understanding of the Black masses. The task of African-American theatre theorists and aestheticians should become one of theorizing the (re)appropriation this form with insights of Post-Revolutionary thought and ideological aestheticism.

The openness of the aesthetic minds of American Negro theatre traditionalist to the strategic potentials of the "urban circuit genre" also indicates a readiness to grasp the concepts of Post-Revolutionary African-American theatre aesthetics. An aesthetic declaration, resulting from the National Black Theatre Summit "On Golden Pond," is a collective document that brings together historical insights and philosophies of African-American theatre development akin to the conclusive discoveries of this study.

The declaration is a consensus document, just as all the reports resulting from the summit events are, and it indicates a kind of unified perspective never seen before

in the history of African-American theatre development. The arrangement of the document was overseen by the Committee on Aesthetics, Standards and Practices, one of six committees comprised of the 45 invited participants meeting at Dartmouth College's Minary Conference Center in Ashland, New Hampshire. The committee was charged with "conceptualizing a consensus as to aesthetic values and practices for African American theatres and methods for sharing information about exemplary practices."

The declaration as published in Black Theatre's Unprecedented Times has sixteen boldfaced and capitalized headings indicating the major points covered in the document. The headings are essentially statements or words followed by clarifying points concerning the (re)definition of dramatic aesthetics and is intended to "express and guide an African based sensibility of American theater [sic] as it has evolved and continues to gain recognition beyond the shores of the United States."[369] The headings and brief elements of the document state:

> PERFORMATIVE, NOT DIDACTIC
> to affirm the tradition; and, yet transform the condition . . . to explore, refine, define and evolve our expressive strategies.
> COLLECTIVE SELF-DEFINITION
> subverts the hegemonic character of the European tradition. . . . centered on the unity of spirit and corporal life.

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[369] "Aesthetics: A Declaration." Black Theatre's Unprecedented Times, 119.

A PRESERVATIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE DRAMATIC RITUAL

a sense of being transformed, awakened, uplifted.

SPACE AS THE GROUND FOR RITUAL

We alter the space/ universe by the aesthetic choice we make.

CENTRALITY OF SPIRIT

connects to ancestral spirit. The artist is and must be a vessel for divine and ancestral forces.

DYNAMIC

the potential to reformulate itself over time and circumstances.

RECOGNIZABLE AND UNDERSTOOD RHYTHMS

attitude toward language, both verbal and non-verbal . . . a ply-vocal chorus/ movement . . . Ensemble playing . . . Text as a score, . . .Improvisation, repetition, call and response.

ENSEMBLE/ SOLO/ ENSEMBLE

linkage of the solo artist to the specific - community - allowing illumination of the larger humanity.

DEEP STRUCTURE OF EXPRESSION

[centered] on the fractures of many migrations (middle passage, underground railroad, great migration north - bussing).

INFINITE POSSIBILITIES

Trickster, shape charger, infinite possibilities - exaggeration that exceeds expectation - invocatory gesture.

JOY

shift in form from humor to song or movement.

POSITIVE ILLUMINATION

[selecting and constructing] narratives that result in a positive illumination of our experience.

PASSION

fueled by our sense of urgency.

BEAUTY

coolness and balance - as opposed to the traditional.Western notions of "prettiness" - how the whole comes together in the fulfillment of the ritual.

TENSION BETWEEN I/WE

individual self is still subject to accountability and responsibility.

CONTINUITY OF SPIRIT

reach backward to - ancestral spirit and call it forward - reasserts cultural identity, and

> invents new and innovative ways of looking at the world.

This declaration states and affirms many of my own feelings and insights about African-American theatre. The first heading indicates continual acknowledgment of an African-American dramatic tradition while at the same time encourages openness, awareness and the need for on-going development and renewal.

Notions of transformation are repeated from one section to another, indicating the revisionist aspects of Black life in the Americas; the constant ability to adjust as a means of survival. This acknowledges the proclivities of African-Americans to improvise and utilize "play" as a needed source of joy and freedom to offset feelings of oppressiveness, disregard and disrespect. It proclaims the linkage and power of a continuous spiritual presence. It promotes unity of action and responsibility among artists for the betterment of a larger community and society of "others" and "otherness." These are ideals of the declaration and these are the desired expectations for an African-American theatrical future in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Considering the dancing and drumming by slaves during the Middle Passage (ca. 1664) and the continuation of such duties on southern plantations as early forced "public"

performaces by African-Americans,[370] and considering DuBois's The Souls of Black Folk as the initiating aesthetic document for an African-American theatre dynamic, "Aesthetic: A Declaration" (as presented in Black Theatre's Unprecedented Times) is the culmination of over three-hundred years of historical development in African-American dramatic theory. As a written tradition it is a very short history of a still young legitimately recognized institution. But the present revelations signal greater potentials than ever before.

Potential has always been the one major continuous characteristic that defines African-American theatrical development. Potential is the continuum that sustains this art form. Both the necessity and willingness of African-American artists to remain open to the possible, yet, suspicious of rigidity and stasis, has allowed African-American theatre as an institution to operate in a constant state of revisionism and development. The historical tensions that forced its birth remains its sustaining force, for the moment, and its Kuntu spirit is eternal and ultimately freeing.

As I see it, the establishment of a theoretical asesthetic for a Post-Revolutionary African-American theatre of the twenty-first century is a necessary challenge that might best be accomplished with care and

[370] Hughes and Meltzer, 2.

sensitivity. The aim of such theory is to set forth a framework that allows alternative insights to be heard, seen and judged by their own standards while at the same time presenting those insights in such a way that they may be shared and understood by all. It requires clear and insightful demystification, transfiguration and transmittal of the often austere Eurocentric theories of the past, greater exposure of the theoretical tradition of African-American theatre, and the creation of new critical apparatuses, theoretical essays, manifestoes, theses and dissertations which analyze from the African-American Post-Revolutionary perspective which will certainly build on established theoretical works of the Negro/ Black/ African-American aesthetics of the past and present.

The work that I have done here is not new. People have thought some of these thoughts and had many discussions on this topic for many years. For these knowledgeable some - the information is not new. What is new is the approach and the reading of - not just individual articles - but a history and a tradition of African-American dramatic theory and philosophy that provides for the taking advantage of this moment in time to establish a clearly defined aesthetic ideology based on that history and tradition.

For a new generation of young Black artists this work presents a sketch of the heritage and tradition they can

now stand and play on. An ideological stage or playing ground can be (re)constructed to serve a number of expressive modes. Such modes may include: 1. The Urban Circuit genre - derived from minstrelsy, vaudeville and the early Black musicals of Williams, Walker, Isham, Cole, Cook, et al. 2. Black Humor plays - in the tradition of Langston Hughes, Ossie Davis, Don Evans, Celeste Bedford Walker, etc. 3. Black Folk plays - providing voice to inarticulate southern Black cultures as in the works of Willis Richardson, Zora Neal Hurston, Judi Ann Mason and the like. 4. Social Problem plays - that date back to Angelina Grimke, Georgia Douglas Johnson and includes plays by James Baldwin and Richard Wesley. 5. Poetic Narratives - like those of Samm-Art Williams and Shay Youngblood. 6. Realistic/ Black Experience Dramas - of Ed Bullins, Joseph Walker, Leslie Lee and August Wilson. 7. Experimental Avant Garde and Abstract works - of Adrienne Kennedy, Amiri Baraka, Ntozake Shange, George C. Wolfe, Suzan-Lori Parks and Keith Antar Mason. 8. The Historical and Kuntu plays - of Paul Carter Harrison, Pepper Carrill, and others. And then there is the whole range of new ideas as presented by solo and performance artists; Robbie McCauley, Roger Guenveur Smith, Anna Deavere Smith, Idris Ackamoor and Rhodessa Jones, and young expressionists like Dominic Taylor.

Of course there are many more artists than it is possible to list here. It would take far too long and much too much reading. But the point is simple. Black theatre has enough of a history and tradition to now follow its own paths without overwhelming need for approval from the hegemonic "other" world. The Post-Revolutionary era awaits all things that are possible. Black theatre is already revolutionary. It was born revolutionary and that is an undeniable part of its heritage. It has had to protest, revolt and assert itself at every turn in order to be acknowledged for other than purposes of objectification. In order to find and express its self-identity, revolution and oppositional strategies and tactics have played a big role in its day-to-day existence.

I suggest that African-American theatre now embrace its own past and utilize the means of the present to empower itself by taking agency and proclaiming itself the subject of an African-American Black theatre perspective. It is now possible to move beyond the past revolutionary era into the Post-Revolutionary era of endless possibilities made possible by the endless and eternal power of the continuous spirit of DuBoisian criteria of beauty, righteousness and truth.

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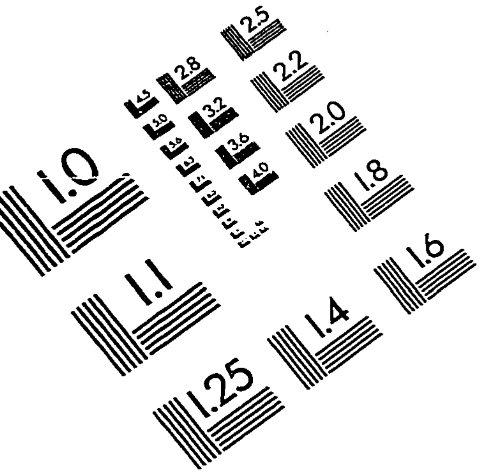
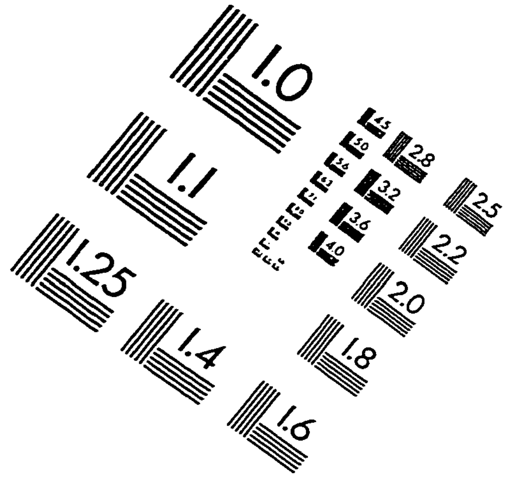
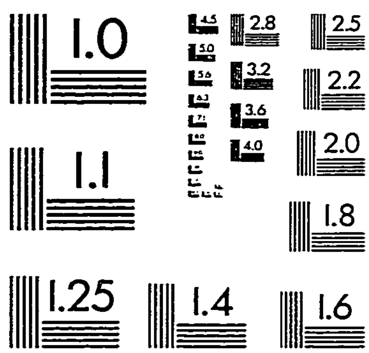
IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)







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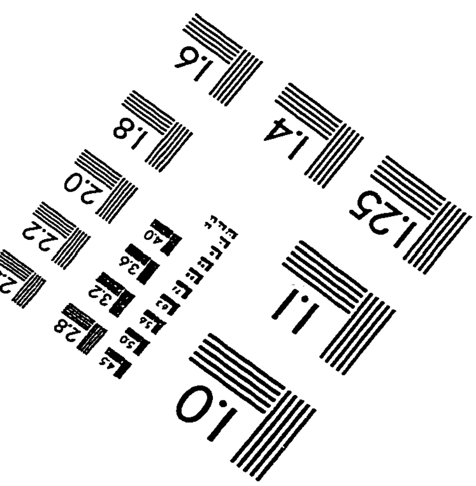

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