

Valorizing Ancestor Discourse: Harlem Renaissance Criticism and Theatre Theory

Henry Miller

Abstract

Today our history seems to vanish into the mainstream twenty-four hour news cycle, and we tend not to valorize our ancestors, immediate or distant. If we do valorize them, it is in name only. Too many of us seem to have forgotten just why it is we are standing on so many bye-gone shoulders.

This writing includes the vital discourse on the nature of Black drama as carried on by our immediate ancestors in the period known as the Harlem Renaissance; it includes consideration of the writings of W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Angelina Grimké, and Hubert Harrison. It argues that the development of black American theatre criticism and theory cannot be properly considered in a purely social and political “vacuum of blackness,” divorced from the major events of 20th century history.

The Great Depression, World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, etc., have all, quoting Harold Cruse, helped to establish an “historical discontinuity” that has often separated black Americans from their cultural history, most especially in the area of black theatre criticism and theory. This circumstance has all but destroyed a vital cultural and aesthetic continuum that this discussion, at least in part, seeks to restore.

Today our history as a nation and as a people seems to vanish into the thin air of the mainstream media’s twenty-four hour news cycle, and we tend not to valorize our ancestors, immediate or distant. If we do valorize them, it is mostly in name only. That is, we have forgotten, if we ever knew, why it is that we are, in fact, standing on so many bygone shoulders.

Historical Background

It is difficult to know with reasonable certainty when the ideas about black American theatre criticism and theory that dominated the Harlem Renaissance were first posed; their seeds reach back into the nineteenth century. Most of the men—and women, too—of the Renaissance who posed these ideas in their plays and critical writings were themselves either members or products of what William Easton, an early African-American playwright of the 1890s, called the “emancipation literati.” [1]

The sometimes “bitter clashes” of the 1890s, as reported by James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), between his theatre colleagues Robert A. Cole (1868-1911) and Will Marion Cook (1869-1944), mostly over what should be the proper nature of Negro Musical theatre, was, in fact, a deep critique of black drama as executed in the real terms of theatre practice as opposed to competing theoretical arguments or scholarly position papers. Following Johnson’s earlier observations, Allen Woll writes that “Cole believed that blacks should strive for excellence in artistic creation and must compete on an equal basis with whites” whether or not such excellence had anything to do with the Negro. Cook, however, Woll adds, believed that the Negro on stage ought to be a “genuine” Negro and should “eschew ‘white patterns,’ and not employ his efforts in doing what ‘the white artist could always do as well, generally better.’”^[2] Both Cole and Cook were bona fide members of the “emancipation literati.” And, in theatre history, their opposing views were forerunners of W.E.B. Du Bois’ (1868-1963) notion of a deep opposition in what he called “Negro-ness” and “American-ness.” In 1903, Du Bois would suggest that there was a cultural duality, a “double consciousness,” if you will, in being both a Negro and an American.^[3] Du Bois, too, was yet another member of Easton’s “emancipation literati.”

By 1913, DuBois’ would find a connection between American Negro art and ancient Egyptian and sub-Saharan African art.^[4] In 1916, in “The Drama among Black Folk,” Du Bois would dream of a “new” Negro theatre that would both “teach colored people the meaning of their history and their rich emotional life ...” and “reveal the Negro to the white world as a human feeling thing.”^[5] It would seem that Cole’s principal aim to compete artistically with whites whether or not that art had anything to do with the Negro could certainly help to “reveal” the Negro’s humanity “to the white world,” and that Cook’s genuine Negro on stage would definitely help to “teach” Negroes “the meaning of their history and their rich emotional life.” Du Bois, perhaps unknowingly, had reduced the differences in the opposing philosophies supporting Cole and Cook’s theatre practice to a critique and theoretical sketch of what Negro drama and theatre ought to be. But those sometimes bitter differences simply would not completely give way to abstract theory. That same year, 1916, this fact was made clear when a majority of the NAACP’s Washington, DC Drama Committee planned to produce Angelina Grimké’s play *Rachel*, and two Committee members, Howard University professors, the philosopher Alain Locke (1885-1954), and Montgomery Gregory (1887-1971), objected. The Drama Committee debate over the staging of *Rachel* clarified and expanded the Cole-Cook differences that had consciously or unconsciously informed DuBois’ theory.

Grimké’s play depicts the story of Rachel, a young Northern woman who gives up her nearly all-consuming dream of motherhood when she learns a family secret: years earlier, her father and an elder brother had been lynched by a southern mob.^[6] *Rachel* was certainly a vehicle written to “reveal to the white world” the Negro’s humanity—Grimké would later state as much in 1920.^[7] Moreover, the play was selected as an answer to D.W. Griffiths’ controversial 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*. If Griffiths’ film saga, saturated with anti-Negro propaganda, had

achieved spectacular national popularity, perhaps it was time to answer it with a pro-Negro stage drama.^[8] Thus, a majority of the Drama Committee selected *Rachel* to “enlighten the American people” about the “lamentable condition of ten millions of Colored citizens” at home—just after

over 700,000 of those “Colored citizens” had been mobilized to “Save Civilization” abroad in World War I.

Nevertheless, for Locke and Gregory, Grimké’s play was definitely not an attempt to put Cook’s genuine Negro on the American stage. They found that written primarily to enlist white women, mothers and potential mothers, in the battle against color prejudice, *Rachel* did little to “teach Negroes the meaning of their history and rich emotional life.” In fact, Grimké’s choice to have her central character ultimately reject marriage and motherhood earned the mostly Negro criticism that the play “preached race suicide.” In the early twentieth century the importance and sanctity of motherhood was a long established cultural staple of traditional Negro life.

Ultimately, for Locke and Gregory, *Rachel* was one more protest vehicle that perhaps captured some of the tragedies of Negro life but failed to also depict its beauties. In his resignation letter to the Drama Committee, Locke suggested that only a Negro Folk drama could do both.^[9] More importantly, in keeping with his broader aim, Locke believed that only a Negro Folk drama could help to establish a National Negro theatre. However, *Rachel*, reportedly the first extant full-length straight-drama written by an African American and produced in the twentieth century, did become the first of a number of significant twentieth-century plays about lynching authored by American women.^[10] But, as to his broader aim, Locke was right. With only four presentations of *Rachel*, two of them attended mostly by friends and family, Grimké’s play never became the catalyst for building a National Negro Theatre.^[11]

Harlem Renaissance Criticism and Theory

During the Harlem Renaissance there were but two historical figures who can reasonably be described as theorists: the seminal sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois and, like Aristotle, the philosopher Alain Leroy Locke. Yet, neither Locke, Du Bois, nor any other figure in African American arts and letters in this period would have described themselves as theatre theorists. Nevertheless, the historical record shows that Du Bois and Locke each had a pervasive and singular influence on Negro arts at a time when formative and enduring questions about those arts, including the drama, were being posed. In addition to participating in the Negro theatre arts since 1913 and almost single-handedly invoking the arts and letters credo of the early Harlem Renaissance, Du Bois was also the Editor of the *Crisis Magazine*, the NAACP organ that was, from its founding in 1909 to the 1930s, the most widely read publication in Negro America. Thus, Du Bois’ views on politics and the arts were widely absorbed by a mostly grateful national Negro public. Similarly, it is seldom remembered that in addition to Alain Locke’s efforts to encourage the establishment of a Negro Art-Theatre from about 1916 almost until his death in 1954, he was the first African American Rhodes Scholar—a status he held for some forty years—and this fact alone gave him a formidable influence over the thinking of the Negro intelligentsia of his day.

In 1920, Du Bois identified a “renaissance” in Negro literature.” By this time, Grimké had published *Rachel* in book form and, in “Rachel: The Play of the Month,” she defended the criticism that her play “preached race suicide,” writing that it depicted but one “highly-strung girl’s” reaction to racial prejudice.^[12] Here, too, Grimké would write: “Because of environment and certain inherent qualities each of us react correspondingly and logically to

the various forces about us . . . if these forces be of love, we react with love, and if of hate with hate.” And these words, arguably, would make her the true mother and theoretical founder of twentieth-century African American protest drama.

It can be reasonably argued that with few exceptions virtually all black American protest drama, in one way or another, evaluates black dramatic figures primarily in terms of the “various forces about them,” mostly forces of racial prejudice. But perhaps the most stunning example of the prophetic and seminal nature of Grimké’s assumption occurs forty-four years later in the award-winning play *Dutchman* written by the leading Black theatre theorist of the period, Amiri Baraka. In the concluding scene of *Dutchman*, Clay, Baraka’s hero, suggests that an inner rage at oppression is the source of Charley Parker’s jazz and Bessie Smith’s blues: ^[13]

Bird [Charlie Parker] would’ve played not one note of music if he
just walked up East Sixty-seventh Street and killed the first ten
white people he saw . . . [and] If Bessie Smith had killed some
white people she wouldn’t have needed that music.

By 1921, the Cole-Cook differences echoed in Du Bois’ 1903 theoretical sketch of black drama and expanded in the NAACP’s Drama Committee difficulties over the selection of *Rachel* were flowering into a full-fledged art versus protest or “Art or Propaganda” debate.” In June, Eugene O’Neill’s 1920 production of *The Emperor Jones* starring Charles Gilpin came under attack—again, mostly from Negro quarters: the play, it was charged, “portrayed the worst elements of both races,” and “slandered the Negro.”^[14] But then Hubert Harrison (1883-1927), the prominent Harlem activist, writer, and co-founder of the 135th Street Public Library, reviewed the play; he gave special attention to the psychological and emotional dimensions of the scene in which Emperor Jones attempts to escape through a forest haunted by “specters” from his past:

The soul of the individual is a bud on the stem of ancestry; the base
of the individual’s mind is bedded in the roots of his race, which is
moulded of that race’s experience. And in the succeeding scenes the
specters are the past horrors of racial experience, which rise from the
roots of Jones’s sub-conscious mind.

Obviously, for Harrison, Jones was Cook’s “genuine” Negro on stage and, following Du Bois, Jones depicted “the meaning of” at least one Negro’s history and rich emotional life.” Fulfilling this primary objective of Negro drama, Harrison found that O’Neill’s play was nothing less than “a work of genius.” Proving the Negro’s equality (Cole’s objective) or humanity to the white world (Du Bois’ second aim) was clearly not part of Harrison or O’Neill’s concern.

Harrison sent his review to O'Neill with the comment that a number of Negro writers complained that "the play does not elevate the Negro," which made it necessary for him "to explain that the drama is intended to mirror life." Sounding very much like Alain Locke, O'Neill replied: "Such folk do not realize that the only propaganda that strikes home is the truth about the human soul, black or white ... the same criticism ... is made by a similar class of white people about my other plays—they don't elevate them."

That same month, June 1921, making, arguably, his most prophetic and accurate application of his "double consciousness" notion to drama authored by Negro writers, Du Bois was, perhaps surprisingly, fully in agreement with Harrison and O'Neill; in part, he wrote:

We are so used to seeing the truth distorted to our despise, that whenever we are portrayed on . . . stage, as simple humans with human frailties, we rebel. We want everything said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our *Art and Propaganda* be one. This is wrong and the end is harmful.^[15]

This then was the "double consciousness" of the Negro writer and much of the Negro audience; both wanted the developing and opposing tributaries of the Cole/Cook differences and of Du Bois' thought: art on the one hand and propaganda on the other.

By 1922, Alain Locke was seven years into his almost covert advocacy for that tributary of Du Bois' thought that called for a Negro "art theatre" inspired by the folk elements of Negro life. Locke went public with his advocacy in "Steps Toward a Negro Theatre."^[16] Walter Dyson writes that in 1919, Montgomery Gregory had been appointed head of Howard University's speech department and that Gregory organized Howard's "first department of dramatic art." Obviously, with Locke's help, the Howard Players were formed, and "the Players," writes Dyson, "specialized in the production of plays of Negro life either written by students or others." In 1922 the Players presented three one-act Negro dramas, one by the well-known white playwright, Ridgely Torrence, and the other two by Howard students, Helen Webb and De Reath Beausey. Du Bois, a supporter of the NAACP 1916 decision to stage Grimké's *Rachel*, cited the Players' work "as one of the significant achievements of the race for the year 1922."^[17] Locke and Gregory had finally responded to their 1916 NAACP Drama Committee defeat.

With playwrights and actors who had flowered in what Locke called "their own soil," Locke and Gregory intended to carefully build a national Negro Theatre. And Locke was keenly aware of the dangers Negro theatre artists confronted on the mainstream stage; he wrote:

The stock [playwrights and actors] must be cultivated beyond the demands ... of the marketplace ... must be safe somewhere from

the exploitation and the ruthlessness of the commercial theatre and
in the protected housing of the art-theatre.^[18]

In 1925, at the beginning of what was known as the “High Harlem Renaissance,” Alain Locke “unloaded” what Samuel Hay has called “a double-barrel fusillade” in the developing Art or Propaganda war.^[19] In “Enter the New Negro,” Locke wrote that the “three norms ... the Sociologist, The Philanthropist, and The Race-leader ... had mistakenly defined the Negro as a formula—a some-thing to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be kept down or helped up ... harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden.” But, Locke found that “the new Negro no longer saw himself as a social problem”; the Negro was experiencing “a spiritual Coming of Age.” Grimké’s ideal audience of liberal white women and Du Bois’ protest goals, aimed at putting the Negro’s “best face forward” were, apparently, strategies of the past.^[20] In “Youth Speaks,” the second shot in Locke’s “double-barrel” against propaganda, he wrote: “Our poets have now stopped speaking for the Negro—they speak as Negroes. Where formerly they spoke to others and tried to interpret, they now speak to their own and try to express.”

There is little doubt that Du Bois was “The Sociologist” and “Race Leader “norm” in Locke’s “Enter the New Negro.” Before 1925, Du Bois’ “new theatre,” writes Hay, “consisted of characters and situations that depicted the struggle of African Americans against racism, which Du Bois called ‘Outer Life.’” But, in “Youth Speaks,” Locke found that the “objectives” of the Negro’s “outer life are ... none other than the ideals of American institutions and democracy.” In Negro art, Locke had begun to see the Negro’s “inner objectives”: to “repair a damaged group psychology and reshape a warped social perspective,” a process primarily unconcerned with “putting the best face forward” for white consumption. Locke found that inner life objectives were already producing in Negro art a “lapse of sentimental appeal,” a “gradual recovery from hyper-sensitiveness,” and “the rise from social disillusionment to race pride.”

Moreover, Locke’s advocacy of aesthetic independence and race pride had received a generous, if generally unacknowledged, helping hand from the meteoric rise of Marcus Garvey’s (1887-1940) U.N.I.A (Universal Negro Improvement Association). E. David Cronon writes that by 1920, U.N.I.A. membership reached from “Africa to California, from Nova Scotia to South America.” With its ideals of race consciousness and pride, the spectacular, if short-lived, phenomenon of Garveyism, allowed Locke to reasonably write: “now [the Negro] becomes a conscious contributor and lays aside the status of a beneficiary and ward for that of a collaborator and participant in American civilization.”^[21]

Locke had already attacked propaganda in the drama in 1923, writing that “it is not the business of plays to solve problems or to reform society.” Du Bois, apparently, ignored that remark, but in 1924, in “The Negro and the Stage,” the playwright Willis Richardson, seemed to reply to it. Richardson wrote that the theatre was “an educational institution along with the school.” Educational institutions at least have the potential to reform society. In “Propaganda in the Theatre,” published a month later, Richardson reduced the definition of the propaganda play to “a play written for some purpose other than the entertainment of an audience”;^[22] he cited, among other authors of propaganda plays, Shaw, Eugene Brieux, and Gerhart Hauptman—and

for Richardson, Shaw was one of “the drama’s leading propagandists.” Richardson writes that the excellent propaganda plays by these authors and, indeed, all such plays are written “for the purpose of waging war against certain evils existing among the people.”

Notwithstanding his call for Negro drama that would surpass Grimké’s *Rachel*, five years earlier,^[23] Richardson, in 1924, made little or no distinction between Negro propaganda plays and what Theophilus Lewis (1891-1974) would have termed “social documents.” Lewis was the Theatre Columnist for *the Messenger* and author of numerous articles on theatre published in various periodicals. He “produced, writes Theodore Kornweibel, “the most thought out and consistent commentary on black theatre... during the Harlem Renaissance.” In Lewis’ later review of the stage version of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, he found that though the play had nothing to do with Negro life, he was “half convinced that the thoughtful Aframerican who knows that sociology is not just a big word will find it a more interesting and diverting *social document* than any of the so-called Negro plays which have so far appeared on the American stage.”^[24] In this same column, Lewis gave a glowing review to O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*.

In January 1925, before Locke’s “The New Negro” and “Youth Speaks,” Lewis, in “Same Old Blues,” charged Du Bois with “unconsciously” promoting the notion that the “legitimate stage was indivisible from the white stage.” Du Bois had written that Charles Gilpin “got his first chance on the legitimate stage playing the part of Curtis in Drinkwater’s *Abraham Lincoln*” [1918] after training with colored companies.^[25] That the white stage was the legitimate stage and therefore produced the only legitimate drama was, for Lewis, the “attitude” of most Negroes “with theatrical aspirations,” and this was part and parcel of the Negro theatre’s “same old blues.” “In the mind of this foremost Negro scholar,” writes Lewis, “a Negro actor has not played a legitimate role unless he has played it on Broadway.” Lewis continued, “Hence

the most useful factotum who has appeared early in the history of almost every other group . . . the actor-dramatist, striving to express the group character . . . esthetically, has never been evolved by the Negro Theatre. In his stead the Negro Theatre has produced the actor-showsmith who sought his material, not in Negro life, but on the Caucasian stage.

Concluding “Same Old Blues,” Lewis called on educated Negroes to stop “crying for white folks to give them a chance on the ‘legitimate’ stage” and “turn their attention to producing Negro drama for Negro audiences.” But four months later Willis Richardson found that Negro audiences “do not generally like . . . unpleasant characters and endings, and . . . they forget, if they ever knew, the main business of the drama is the portrayal of human characters.”^[26] Richardson had recently witnessed a production of *The Emperor Jones* at Howard University in which a “respected” English professor and much of the audience “wondered why the University would

stoop to allow its students to give a performance of a play in which the leading character was a crapshooter and [an] escaped convict.” And the following month, on the Editorial page of the *Crisis*,^[27] Du Bois seemed to agree with Richardson:

We are seriously crippling Negro art and literature by refusing to con-
template any but handsome heroes, unblemished heroines . . . we
insist on being always and everywhere all right and often we ruin our
cause by claiming too much and admitting no faults.

It appeared that much of the audience on whom Theophilus Lewis would rest the future of Negro drama wanted propaganda, not art.

At year’s end, 1925, in “The Social Origins of American Negro Art,” Du Bois summed up the meaning of the Negro art renaissance he had predicted in 1920.^[28] He wrote that while not all Negro art “contributed to any particular group expression,” there had been a recent body of work in novels, plays, painting, sculpture, and music that could be called Negro art. The source of this new art was “primarily individualistic,” Du Bois observed, “the cry of some caged soul yearning for expression.” But in the new art, Du Bois also sensed that “a certain group compulsion” had combined with the “individual impulse” so “that the . . . experience of thousands . . . influence consciously and unconsciously the message of the one who speaks for all.” Here, too, Du Bois attributed the “group compulsion” inspiring the new art to the “sorrow and strain inherent in American slavery,” and “the difficulties that sprang from emancipation.”

Du Bois began 1926 giving Locke a somewhat backhanded compliment on the late 1925 publication of *The New Negro*, which Locke had edited. He noted that although Locke argued for “Beauty in Negro literature and art” as opposed to “Propaganda,” *The New Negro* itself “proves the falseness of this thesis.” The book was “filled with propaganda” that was “beautiful and painstakingly done,” writes Du Bois. But he warned that if Locke’s thesis was too broadly applied it could lead “the Negro Renaissance into decadence.” Du Bois insisted that the late

nineteenth and early twentieth century new Negro struggle for “Life and Liberty” was “the soul” of the new movement in Negro Arts and Letters. If this struggle was forgotten and “the young Negro tries to do pretty things,” writes Du Bois, “or things that catch the . . . fancy of the really unimportant critics . . . he will find that he has killed the soul of Beauty in Art.”^[29]

“Life and Truth . . . are important,” writes Du Bois, “and Beauty comes to make their importance visible and tolerable.” He suggests that important truths are hidden in the conven-tions and rush of everyday life and that Beauty in art frames and illuminates these truths, re-covering them from the mundane. Further, beauty in art is also, for Du Bois, a palliative that makes “tolerable” life’s often ugly truths. He addressed young Negro writers telling them that “in the *Crisis*” they did not have to limit their work to “beggars, scoundrels, and prostitutes.” But here, too, he wrote:

On the other hand, do not fear the Truth.... If you want to paint Crime
and Destitution and Evil, paint it . . . Use propaganda if you want.
Discard it and laugh if you will. But be true, be sincere, be thorough,
and do a beautiful job.

And this, of course, was what Darwin Turner called the seemingly “inherent contradictions that have deceived critics who ... have fixed Du Bois at one or another of his positions.”

In June 1926, at the Chicago NAACP Conference, Du Bois made his most comprehensive statements, to date, on Beauty, Truth, and Propaganda in his speech “The Criteria of Negro Art.”^[30] He also answered one of his major critics: Chandler Owen (1889-1967), the co-editor of the *Messenger* with A. Phillip Randolph. Obviously, with Du Bois in mind, Owen had written, that “art may, or may not, be beautiful,” and that “Truth is not an indispensable part of art.” For example, “*The Klansman* and *Birth of Nation* are certainly art products,” writes Owen, “yet both are vicious and mean” and “the anti-slavery artists picture slavery in hideous horror. The uglier the art, the more effective it was.” Here, Du Bois’ response was that artists had historically “used Truth” as “the highest handmaiden of imagination” and as a “vehicle of uni-versal understanding.” For Du Bois, even Truth that revealed ugliness revealed beauty. In truthfully depicting what Owen called the “hideous horror” of slavery, abolitionist artists were pointing, inversely, to the beauty of freedom and of indomitable human will clinging to life whatever the circumstances. And “goodness,” which Chandler Owen identified with no basic principle of art, was, for Du Bois, a tool used

not for the sake of an ethical sanction but as the one true method
of gaining sympathy and human interest ... The apostle of Beauty
thus becomes the apostle of Truth ... not by choice but by inner
and outer compulsion.

Therefore, Du Bois adds, “all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists.” In “The Criteria of Negro Art,” the “Sociologist, Race Leader ‘norn’ had also directly responded to the principal “wailing purist,” Alain LeRoy Locke.

Also in 1926, in the pages of the *Nation*, George S. Schuyler (1895-1977), satirist, journalist, and perhaps the leading H.L. Mencken-like critic of Negro America, faced off with Langston Hughes (1902-1967) concerning Negro Art and Cook’s “genuine” Negro question.^[31]

Schuyler argued that the development of Negro art was solely “among the numerous black nations of Africa,” and to suggest that such a development was taking place in Negro America was “self-evident foolishness.” The “Aframerican,” Schuyler added, was merely “a lamp-black Anglo-Saxon.” To Schuyler, the discourse on Negro art between Du Bois, Locke,

Lewis, Richardson, Hughes, and others constituted “The Negro-Art Hokum.” Hughes’ rebuttal was a severe critique of the Negro middle and upper class. He insisted that rather than being “lamp-black Anglo-Saxons,” these Negro groups wanted to be white. And, for Hughes, wanting to be white was the great tragedy of self-hatred in Negro life. In the typical Negro middle class home, Hughes wrote

how difficult it would be for an artist born in such a home to interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns.

A few years later, in “A Criticism of Negro Drama,” the award-winning dramatist Eulalie Spence, arguably, along with Willis Richardson, the most prolific and influential playwright of the Renaissance, joined the debate.^[32] Much later Spence would become the major inspiration in a young Joseph Papp’s decision to follow a career in the theatre—Papp later founded New York City’s historic Public Theatre. But in 1928, unlike most of the Negro writers of her day, Spence had been trained in acting and playwriting. Consequently, she agreed with Hubert Harrison that a great number of Negro writers knew little about the drama. Spence claimed she had read Negro authored plays with the written caveat: “To Be Read. Not Played!” to which she replied: “Why not the song to be read not sung?” Spence wrote that most Negro playwrights had “labored like the architect who has no knowledge of geometry and the painter who ... struggles to evolve the principles of perspective.” Moreover, although in 1926, she had supplied Du Bois’ Krigwa Players with an award-winning one-act comedy (*Fool’s Errand*), she was, perhaps unknowingly, a devotee of Locke’s anti-propaganda Negro art theatre. She advised Negro dramatists to avoid propaganda. “The white man is unresponsive to the subject,” she wrote, and “the Negro ... is hurt and humiliated by it.” However, “if we have a Shaw or a Galsworthy,” she observed, “let him wander ... in the ... devious paths of race dissection.” With propaganda mostly out of the picture, the Negro dramatist was left with, Spence concluded, the portrayal of “the life of his people, their foibles ... their sorrow and ambitions and defeats ... let us have all these, told with tenderness and skill and a knowledge of the theatre and the technique of the times.”

Even before Spence had entered the debate, the implications and extensions of the Art or Propaganda tensions first dimly articulated in Cole and Cook’s theatre practice continued apace. Du Bois in his June 1926 NAACP Chicago address had decried what he called “a racial pre-judgment” that “distorts Truth and Justice” which the white majority required of any literature or drama that dealt with Negro subject matter. At the same time, Du Bois said that too many Negroes were “bound by customs” that were “the second-hand clothes of white patrons ... too many of us are ashamed of sex ... our religion holds us in superstition.” Negro readers and audiences had to become, he insisted, the “ultimate judge” of Negro art. “If a colored man wants

to publish a book,” Du Bois warned, “he has to get a white publisher and a white newspaper to say it’s great . . . then you and I say so . . . we are handing everything over to a white jury.”

Two months later, in the *Crisis*, Du Bois outlined his famous four principles of what Negro theatre should be: “1. About us. 2. By us. 3. For us, and 4. Near us.” But if the recurring pronoun “Us” in Du Bois’ principles tended to wrap Negro audiences in a monolithic veil, Theophilus Lewis would have none of it. That same month, July 1926, Lewis divided the Negro audience into two groups: “the groundlings” who “pay the fiddler,” wrote Lewis, and the “indifferent, better class” that “insists on the Negro theatre copying the . . . manners and conventions of the contemporary white American theatre.”^[33] These observations were, of course, closely related to the wanting-to-be-white syndrome in Langston Hughes’ rebuttal to George Schuyler’s notion of American Negroes as merely “lamp-blacked Anglo Saxons.”

In April 1927, Du Bois “reminded his readers” of the Negro’s African artistic roots; he discussed, writes Darwin Turner, “the impressive black heritage revealed in the fine arts of Ethiopia, Egypt, and the rest of Africa.” Turner adds that “in contemporary America,” Du Bois insisted that the Negro’s African artistic heritage “must be continued in the art of the spoken and written word.” In July 1927, in “The Main Problems of the Negro Theatre,”^[34] Lewis wrote that the dramatist was “the only worker in the theater who contributes anything of permanent value.” And, agreeing with Du Bois’ second principle of Negro drama, Lewis asserted that “the demand for Negro drama . . . is a demand for plays written by Negro authors.” Thus, for Lewis one of the main problems that the Negro theatre “must face is how to encourage colored playwrights . . . that they may pass through the period of apprenticeship quickly and begin to produce mature plays as early as possible.” To answer this problem, Lewis proposed that a national “repertory system” be “developed . . . leading to an exchange of companies knitting together the detached units in a National Negro Theater”—Samuel Hay would make a similar proposal sixty-seven years later.^[35]

In November 1928, the last full year of the High Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke simply asked: “Art or Propaganda? Which? Is this more the generation of the prophet or that of the poet; shall our intellectual and cultural leadership preach and exhort or sing?” Locke’s question identified the core question dominating the discourse on Negro drama since Du Bois first raised it in “The Drama Among Black Folk” in 1916. After a decade and a half, the Art or Propaganda

issue was, Locke wrote, “artistically . . . the one fundamental question for us today.”^[36]

In December 1928, James Weldon Johnson wrote that the Negro author was trapped between two audiences, a white one and a black one, each insisting on its own form of propaganda. Johnson wrote that to “white America” Negroes were “simple, indolent, docile, improvident peasants, or . . . impulsive, irrational, passionate savages.”^[37] Johnson added that practically everything, “written about the Negro in the United States and read with any degree of interest or pleasure by white America conformed to one or more of these ideas.” But, like Du Bois, Johnson found that the Negro author had “no more absolute freedom addressing black America.” There were areas of upper-middle class Negro life that the Negro author “dare not

touch,” Johnson observed, “without incurring the wrath of the entire colored pulpit and press.” And this was so, he reasoned, because American Negroes were, in fact, “a segregated and antagonized minority . . . unremittingly on the defensive. Their faults and failings are exploited to produce exaggerated effects . . . they have a strong feeling against exhibiting to the world anything but their best points.” Johnson concluded finding that “a psychoanalysis of the Negro authors” writing “in strict conformity to the taboos of black America, would reveal that they were unconsciously addressing themselves mainly to white America.” And this astute observation returns us not only to Du Bois’s 1903 notion of Negro “double consciousness,” but also to what is, perhaps, Alain Locke’s most revealing statement about his opposition to propaganda in Negro Art.^[38]

My chief objection to propaganda . . . is that it perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it. For it lives and speaks under the shadow of a dominant majority It is too extroverted for balance or poise or inner dignity and self-respect. Art in the best sense is rooted in self-expression and whether naive or sophisticated is self-contained.

In conclusion, it would be remiss to omit the circumstance that the development of black American theatre criticism and theory did not occur in a purely social and political “vacuum of blackness,” divorced from major twentieth century events: New York replacing Paris as the world’s dominant Western city of Arts and Letters, World War I, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights movement, the rise of American media, etc., have all informed the course of black theatre criticism and theory. Unfortunately, to quote Harold Cruse, these events have also helped to establish an “historical discontinuity”^[39] that has separated an alarming number of black Americans from their cultural history. It is perhaps the highest calling for those of us using the tools of scholarship and delightfully toiling in the field of African American theatre to obliterate that “discontinuity.” Hopefully, the foregoing, almost century old, ancestral discourse on black dramatic art, bears heavily on the progress of black American theatre and drama today, and also reveals a mostly hidden yet vital continuum of thought in the history of African American theatre, which, at least in part, this writing seeks to restore.

End Notes

[1] William Edgar Easton, *Dessalines: A Dramatic Tale* (Boston: JW Burston-Company, Publishers, 1893, author dedication page. Here, Easton coined this phrase.

[2] See Johnson, *Along this Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1933; rpt. ed. Viking Compass Edition, 1968), 173, and Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1989), 6, for the differences between Cole and Cook.

[3] *The Souls of Black Folk* (Atlanta, 1903; reprinted. New York: Library of America, 1986), 8-9.

[4] “The Negro in Literature and the Art,” *Annals* (September 1913), rpt. in Meyer Weinberg, *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Harper and Row), 231.

[5] *Crisis* 12 (August 1916): 171.

[6] See the play in James V. Hatch, ed. *Black Theatre USA: 45 Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974* (New York: Free Press, 1974), 137-172.

[7] “Rachel: The Play of the Month,” *Competitor*, Jan. 1920, 52. Here, Grimké writes that *Rachel* was written to reach “the hearts” of “white women,” so that “a great power to affect public opinion would be set free and the battle [against prejudice] would be half won.”

[8] Charles F. Kellogg, v. 1, *NAACP: A History of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1909-1920* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1967), 145, has comments on *Rachel* as a response to *Birth of Nation* with the supporting evidence of the NAACP Board Minutes of 13

March 1916, 9 April 1917, and 14 May 1917 cited in n24. The next citations are in Hatch, *Black Theatre USA*, 137.

[9] Locke to Archibald Grimké, undated, Alain Locke Papers, the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

[10] Hatch, *Black Theatre USA: 45 Plays by Black Americans*, 137. Here is information on *Rachel* as the first 20th century produced straight-drama authored by an African American. Also see Kathy Perkins and Judith Stephens, *Strange Fruit: Lynching Plays by American Women*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

[11] Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, & Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, IND: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987), 119-121, is the source for the information about the play and its presentations. And, the four productions of *Rachel* were two in

Washington, DC (March 1916), another in New York City (April 1917), and a final presentation in Cambridge, MA (May 1917).

[12] See the *Crisis* 19, April 1920, 298-299, for Du Bois' "Renaissance of Negro literature"; see the

Competitor, Jan. 1920, 51, for this and the next citation from Grimké.

[13] James V. Hatch and Ted Shine, eds. *Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans – The Recent Period 1935 – Today*, Dutchman (New York: The Free Press, 1996), Scene ii, 390.

[14] Du Bois, "Negro Art," *Crisis* June 1921, rpt in Meyer Weinberg, *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 240. "The Emperor Jones," *Negro World*, June 4, 1921, 6, rpt. in

Jeffrey B. Perry, *A Hubert Harrison Reader* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 378-383; here, too, are all the next quotations of Harrison and O'Neill.

[15] "Negro Art," *Crisis*, June 1921, 55-56. Italics mine.

[16] *Crisis*, December 1922, 66, and Dyson, *Howard University, The Capstone of Negro Education—A History: 1867-1940* (Washington, D.C.: Graduate School Howard Univ., 1941), 147 has the next citation; here, too, 148, is the next citation from Dyson.

[17] *Ibid.*, 149; also, see Ridgely Torrence's *Danse Calinda*, in Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory, eds., *Plays of Negro Life: A Source-book of Native American Drama* (New York: Harper, 1927),

373-386; see Helen Webb's *Genefriede* in Willis Richardson and May Miller, eds., *Negro History in Thirteen plays* (Wash., D.C.: Associated Publishers, Inc., 1935), 220-237, and see Beausey's *The Yellow Tree*, Howard University Moorland-Spingarn Library.

[18] "Steps Toward a Negro Theatre," *Crisis*, December 1922, 66. Here, too, is the previous citations from Locke.

[19] *African American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis* (Cambridge, Eng: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4.

[20] See *Survey Graphic*, 1 March 1925; rpt. in Jeffrey C. Stewart, *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of his essays on Art and Culture* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1983), 7, 10, respectively, for the previous citations of Locke; here, too, 13 and 9, respectively, are the next citations of Locke, and see Hay, *African American Theatre*, 5, 21, and Julius Lester, ed., *The Seventh Son: The*

Thought and Writings of W.E.B. Du Bois (New York: Random House, 1971), 311.

[21]“Enter the New Negro,” *Survey Graphic*, rpt. in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke*, 10; the previous citation of Cronon is in *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison, Wis.: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1955, rpt., 1969), 3, here, too, 15-

20, is fuller discussion of Garvey and the U.N.I.A. The next citation of Locke is in *Opportunity*, February 1923, 30.

[22]*The Messenger*, November 1924, 353; here, too, are the next quotations from Richardson and his illustration of the importance of propaganda plays using Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren Profession* ((1894), Brieux’s *The Red Robe* (1900), and Hauptman’s *The Weavers* (1892). *Opportunity*, October 1924, 310, has the previous citation of Richardson.

[23]“The Hope of A Negro Drama,” *Crisis*, November 1919, 338-39. Also, Richardson’s *The Chip Woman’s Fortune* is in Hamalian and Hatch, *The Roots of African American Drama*, 159-185. The next citation is from Kornweibel, “Theophilus Lewis and the Theatre of the Harlem Renaissance,” in Arna Bontemps, ed., *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1972), 171.

[24]*Messenger*, April 1926, 116; italics mine.

[25]See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk* (Boston: Stratford Co., 1924; rpt. ed. Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson Organization Ltd., 1975), 311. John Drinkwater (1882-1937) was the Artistic

Director of England’s Birmingham Repertory Theatre where *Abraham Lincoln* premiered. See John Drinkwater, *Abraham Lincoln: A Play* (London: Sedgwick & Jackson, 1918), 26, and Heyward Broun’s review of the New York opening of the play mentioning Gilpin, *New York Tribune*, 16 December 1919, 13; the play opened, 15 December 1919, at the Cort Theatre on Broadway.

[26]“The Negro Audience,” *Opportunity*, April 1925, 123.

[27]May 1925, 8

[28]“The Social Origins of American Negro Art,” *Modern Quarterly*, October-December 1925, and rpt. in Weinberg, *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 247-250, has all the next citations from Du Bois.

[29]“The New Negro” (Review), *Crisis*, January 1926, 141 ; here, too, 115, are the next citations of Du Bois, and “W.E.B. Du Bois and The Theory of a Black Aesthetic,” *Studies in a Literary Imaginaton* 7, no 2 (Fall 1974), 9, has the citation from Turner.

[30]“Criteria of Negro Art” speech, published in the *Crisis*, October 1926, rpt. in Weinberg, *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 258-60, and see *Messenger*, January 1925, 23-24, for the next citations from Chandler Owen.

[31]Schuyler’s “The Negro Art Hokum” and Hughes’ “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” was published in the *Nation*, 16 June and 23 June 1926, respectively, and reprinted in Hatch and Hamalian, *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance*, 404-12.

[32]Spence, “A Criticism of Negro Drama,” *Opportunity*, 1928, 180; here, too, are the next quotations from Spence. Also, Spence was a trained dramatist who had studied acting and playwriting at Harlem’s National Ethiopian Art Theatre School in 1924.

[33]*Messenger* (July 1926), 214-15, contain all of the quotations of Lewis from this source, and *Crisis*, July 1926, 134, has the previous citation of Du Bois.

[34]“The Theatre—The Souls of Black Folks,” *Messenger*, 229; here, too, are the next citations of Lewis. The previous citations from Turner are in “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Theory of a Black Aesthetic,” 15.

[35]“The Theatre—The Souls of Black Folks,” *Messenger*, 229, and see Hay, “The National Endowment for African American Theatre, Inc.,” in *African American Theatre*, Appendix C, 230-35.

[36]“Art or Propaganda?” *Harlem*, November 1928, 12.

[37]“The Dilemma of The Negro Author,” *American Mercury*, December 1928, 478; here, too, 479 and 481, are the next quotations of Johnson.

[38]“Art or Propaganda?” *Harlem*, November 1928, 12;

[39]*The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership*. (New York: Morrow and Company, 1967. Reprint, New York: Quill), 1984, 362, 533-34

Director, Dramatist, Theatre Scholar Henry Miller has taught and lectured at the City University of New York, Kean College in New Jersey, North Carolina A&T State University, The University of Kansas, and in the Arts and Theology Program at the Memphis Seminary. His McFarland book, *Theorizing Black Theatre*, was published in 2011. He has also written for the *African American Review*, the *New York Village Voice*, *Theatre Survey*, and Columbia Pictures. His plays have been published by the Alexander Street Press and Samuel French, Inc.

Miller has directed for the Indianapolis Opera, the Opera Company of Philadelphia, Opera Ebony in New York, and much of the African American canon of drama in Regional and Off-Off Broadway theatre venues. His film, *Death of a Dunbar Girl*, was exhibited in Black film festivals in Paris, London, Rome, and New York. Miller founded three South Bronx and Harlem New York theatre companies.

