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製造歷史：非裔美國劇場史的反思

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摘　要

本篇論文旨在檢視戲劇史學的概念　，特別是關於美國非裔劇場的戲劇史學。我將訴諸批評的歷史主義，於論述過程中，達鑑古審今之功。本文著重探討「表演」於今昔美國非裔文化傳統裡所扮演的角色。美國非裔表演史，於過去非裔爭自由的社會、文化與政治抗爭史中已屢被述及。除此之外，本文以演出爲例證，說明美籍非裔能夠製作其歷史，且確已進行之；此等演出，適足以爲其陶鑄自身歷史所用。本篇論文將深入闡明，重探美國非裔表演史之緣由，並非僅爲發掘已亡佚或尚未被指認的史實。同時，更將進一步說明，歷史遞嬗乃想像創造的過程；歷史不僅僅是發現，而是製作。準此，戲劇史學家肩負的使命，係爲想像創造的考古學，既致力揭發過去，更實際參與其於今日之建構。

關鍵詞：非裔美國劇場、劇場史、藍斯頓休斯、*黑白混血*、黑人藝術運動

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Making History：
Rethinking African American Theatre Historiography

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Abstract

This paper examines the notion of historiography in particular African American theatre historiography and calls for a critical historicism, a process that recognizes the need to interrogate the past in order to inform the present. The paper examines the particular role that performance plays and has played within African American culture and tradition. The history of African American performance is always already implicated in the history of African American social, cultural, and political struggles for freedom. In addition, through performance, this paper suggests that African Americans can and do make history and these performances constitute history in themselves. This essay pushes further by suggesting that not only to the need for historical recovery of an African America n performance history that has been lost or previously unrecognized. Rather the essay suggests the process of history can be one of imaginative creation, that history is not simply found but made. What this entails for the theatre historian is a commitment to an imaginative archeology where one endeavors not only to uncover the past but also actually participates in its construction in the present.

Keywords: African American theater, historiography, Langston Hughes, *Mulatto*, Black Arts Movement

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I take issue with history because it doesn't serve me--it doesn't serve me because there isn't enough of it. In this play, I am simply asking, "Where is history?", because I don't see it. I don't see any history out there, so I've made up some.

--Suzan-Lori Parks

If history were past, history wouldn't matter. History is the present…You and I are history. We carry our history. We act our history.

--James Baldwin

Only if history can bear being transformed into a work of art, that is, to become a pure art form, may it perhaps preserve instincts or even rouse them.

--Friedrich Nietzsche

I

These three quotes will serve as a starting point as I enter into a discussion of the role of the theatre historian in general and the historian of African American theatre in particular. My argument is for a critical historicism, a process that recognizes the need to historicize and situate dramatic criticism as well as the need to theorize history or as Walter Benjamin suggests "to rub history against the grain."[1] Rubbing history against the grain means that we must interrogate the past in order to inform the present, remaining cognizant of the material conditions that not only shape theatrical production, but the historical interpretations of production. It infers a need to work against conventional historical narratives and the ways in which history has been told in the past.

Suzan-Lori Parks's quote, "Where is history? I don't see any history out there, so I've made some up," raises some important issues and underscores the particular role that performance plays and has played within African American culture and tradition. The lack of "the text," the written down of history—"You should write it down and you should hide it under uh rock" Park's chorus in *Death of the Last Black Man* intones[2]—for African Americans has often meant that performance becomes a subversive strategy, acting as a form of historical resistance to the omission of the black presence. Negro Spirituals such a "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" contained coded messages about real plans for escape to the North within the figurative tale of a chariot coming to carry them to the afterlife in Heaven. Such masking or "double voicedness" enabled black performances to function on a variety of levels.[3] Even as they performed for the entertainment of the white master, slaves could ridicule or potentially undermine his control simultaneously through the mechanism of performance. Every day survival on the plantation also necessitated the employment

1 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 261.

2 Suzan Lori-Parks, "*Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*," *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: TCG Press, 1995), 111.

3 Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York; Oxford University Press, 1988), .

of certain coded performances, playing the role of deferential subservience or feigned ignorance. Thus, the history of African American performance is always already implicated in the history of African American social, cultural, and political struggles for freedom. In addition, through performance, the Parks quote suggests that African Americans can and do make history and these performances constitute history in themselves.

The Parks epigraph, I believe, can inform how we conduct theatrical research and imagine a critical historicism. Parks points to the contested nature of what constitutes history and the fact that certain histories are missing, certain stories have not been told. The silences of traditional American history, the historical amnesia about under represented minorities and/or the particular fate of African Americans before, during and after the Middle Passage --the treacherous journey of slaveships from Africa to America-- has led to artistic interventions such as that offered by Parks, to make some up. Yet, the Parks quote is about much more than making up for the gaps or holes of history, much more than testifying to the need for historical recovery. Rather, Parks provocatively suggests the process of history can be one of imaginative creation, that history is not simply found but made. What this entails for the theatre historian is a commitment to an imaginative archeology where one endeavors not only to uncover the past but also actually participates in its construction in the present.

One task, for the contemporary theatre historian in attempting to "make history" must be to understand the definitions of theatre in operation for the time periods under investigation. For certainly, the concepts of theatre during the Renaissance, language setting, styles are very different from the notions of theatre at play during the classic period or the romantic. I do not, however, intend to fix the idea of theatre by inferring that theatre meant only one thing and one thing only during the Renaissance. For the definitions of theatre is and was far from static. Rather, what I would argue is that the meanings of theatre were and are always in negotiation, with playwrights and practitioners always working with and against tacit and shifting conventions of what theatre can or should be. And thus the definition of theatre has been invented and reinvented from tradition. So the theatre historian needs to explore these transactions and actively interrogate how the theatre has been culturally,

aesthetically, socially, even spiritually constituted.

Within African American theatre history, for instance, there has been a continual concern amongst artists, critics, and activists with how the construction of theatre relates to the particular social and political conditions of African American life. Because of the particular historic circumstances of African American life, the representation of African Americans on stage has contained profound political, social and cultural meanings, impacts and effects. "What is Black Theatre?" James V. Hatch asks rhetorically in his "Preface" to his 2003 volume cowritten with Errol G. Hill, *A History of African American Theatre*.[4] Hatch continues, "The easy answer appeared to be that it is an act created by black people, but that definition raised more questions."[5] What Hatch and Hill then productively employ in this "the first definitive history of African American theatre"[6] is a flexible, wide-ranging definition of black theatre that moves beyond skin color and geography. They include works produced nationally and internationally by white authors as well as by black that advanced or helped to "change the form or essence of African American theatre."[7] This move by historians Hatch and Hill is significant as it opens up new possibilities and new narrative trajectories for a black theatre history.

I would argue that the historian of African American theatre needs not only to maintain fluidity in articulating this category of black cultural expression but, to recognize the African American artists' own struggles with previously established expectations placed on black theatrical production. African American theater practitioners have had to constantly confront enforced or implied limitations on their artistry and this has greatly impacted their creativity and thus African American theatre history. An examination of the play *Natural Man* by Theodore Browne, first produced as a folk opera on January 28, 1937, offers an intriguing case study in the efforts by black artists to escape constricting labels. The play concerns the legendary figure John Henry, the African American steel driver. According to myth, John Henry,

4 James V. Hatch, "Preface," *A History of African American Theatre, Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xiv.

5 Ibid.

6 Hill and Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre*.

7 James V. Hatch, "Preface," xv.

a larger than life figure of superhuman strength, was the best and fastest man alive at driving spikes into the side of mountain and clearing a path for the railroad. As the story goes, in the late 1800s, John Henry battled against a then newly invented steam drill, that was said to work ten times faster than any man, in a steel driving competition. He defeated the steam drill, but died as a result. Theodore Browne's play, *Natural Man*, dramatizes this legend.

With the very title of his play, Browne riffs on what is "natural" or essential in terms of race; that black people have innate and "natural" abilities that do not require skill and training. Technique and education are antithetical to this idea of the natural. Accordingly, sports narratives often define black athletes as naturally gifted but deny their hard work, intelligence and knowledge of the game. In *Natural Man*, Browne refutes such notions of the natural and shows the natural not to be ontological or essential but to be a man made construction. The play does not traffic in the idea of the hyper-sexualized hyper-athletic black male body. Significantly, there are few scenes of John Henry flexing his might. The play even as it represents John Henry does not imagine him just as black body. In fact, his black body is not always visible. The battle with the steam engine takes place in the tunnel off stage. Flashback moments show him struggling to fit into a society that has no space for the natural man. The sense of the natural in this play is that it is not fixed but subject to different articulations. It most particularly speaks to the ability of black men to move toward self-definition. To stand in the face of white oppression. To exercise their subversive resistance and assert self in the face of white patriarchy that limits black male access to the tools of social progress as exemplified by the steam drill.

A critical historicism can help to uncover how the production values and conditions for the original production of *Natural Man* all interacted with the play's content and form to resist stereotypes of black naturalness. The Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre Project based in Seattle, Washington, first produced the play in January 1937. The Federal Theatre Project (FTP), which ran from 1935-1939, was the only time the United States has operated a fully federally subsidized national theatre program. As a part of the Works Project Administration's New Deal Arts Projects, the objective of the FTP was to put artists and theatre practitioners of all colors back to work. There were 22 black Federal Theatre units in 13 cities across the

country including New York, Boston and Seattle. There were four projects in New York alone with a unit at the Lafayette Theater in Harlem, a Negro youth unit, an African dance unit and a vaudeville unit. The Negro Unit in Seattle put on some of the most experimental productions of any Negro Unit, partly due to the direction of Florence and Burton James, who taught at the University of Washington. In addition, a large and talented pool of professional black actors was available in Seattle. Significantly, these black actors struck Gilmore Brown, the white director of the western region of the FTP, as remarkable because they did not fit the standard image of the "natural" black actor:

> The Negro group is to work under Burton Jones and is, I think, their most interesting activity. They have, however, a curious difficulty---while the Negro population of Seattle is very large, they are mostly educated Negroes, and they are actually having to teach dialect to many of the players in their opening production of *Porgy*. This makes me wonder if our whole white approach to the Negro theatre question isn't wrong.

Gilmore Brown speaks to white expectations and theatrical conventions that the Negro Federal Theatre Units both reinforced and transcended. White audience expected "natural" performances and stereotypical racial embodiments from black actors and these often were a key element in FTP shows. The artistic directors of the Seattle Negro Theatre Unit, Florence and Burton James, like most of the other Negro Unites, were white. This racial hierarchy maintained, even within the seemingly liberal FTP, underscores the persistence of the patronizing and racist conditions that black actors often negotiated at this time and that impacted the unit's work on all levels. Rena Fraden points out in *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre 1935-1939* that white directors' "expectations for black actors were exceptionally low." [8] *Natural Man*, however, a production written by a black playwright and featuring trained and educated black actors, sought to disrupt these directorial assumptions about black ability. Through their skills and their will, the black actors in Seattle taught the white directors what they would and would not do. Browne, in fact,

8 Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 177.

wrote the play with Joe Staton, strong actor with an excellent singing voice, in mind for the part of John Henry. Purposefully in the roles that Browne created, *Natural Man* gives space for black actors to move beyond the stereotype. Consequently, the task for the theatre historian in recuperating this play and its original production is to examine the context of production and to explore how the black artists involved with this premier worked with and against the conventions placed upon them.

Throughout American theatre history black artists have not only waged battles against white social and cultural hegemony, but against the heterodoxy of white and black critical expectations. In 1821, William Brown and the African Company of New York City, the first African American Theatre troupe**,** as Marvin McAllister effectively documents in his recent book, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies & Gentlemen of Colour: William Brown's African & American Theater*, encountered repeated ridicule from white critics. Even more importantly, Mr. Brown and his actors faced not only a white racist media but also the eminent threat of white attack. On August 10, 1822, at an evening performance, a gang of white ruffians entered the theatre without tickets, demolished the scenery and costumes and went on to beat and strip the performers. Despite such coercion, Brown persevered, moving his company in New York four times before ultimately declaring bankruptcy. The company's acting style and selection of subject matter all pointed to a desire beyond that of entertainment to validate black self-worth through the creation of theatre. As argued by McAllister, Brown's artistic survival functioned as political resistance. Some one hundred years after Brown, Georgia Douglas Johnson's Saturday night salon at her home on S Street in Washington D.C. in the early 1920s offered a different site for black theatrical activism and attempts to express creative self-determination through theatre. In her work on Johnson, critic Judith Stephens argues that Johnson and her compatriots, mainly middle class black women, viewed the theatre as a productive venue for expressing social agency and a potent site to advocate for social change. [9] Thus, their plays--generally one-acts-- concerned such topics of social import, such as lynching, racial prejudice and reproductive rights that were critical to African

9 Judith Stephens, "Racial violence and representation: performance strategies in lynching dramas of the 1920s," *African American Review*, 3.4 (Winter 1999): 655-71.

Americans in general and African American women particularly at that time. Through their work, Johnson and her coterie responded to existent representations of blacks within American culture and theatre and voiced a desire to control their own images. While white authors such as Rigdley Torrence, Eugene O'Neill and Dubose Heyward created the dominant images of blacks on stage during this period, the work of these black women offered an alternative image of African Americans. Famously, WE.B. DuBois proclaimed in 1926 that "a real Negro theatre" must be "About us, By us, For us, and Near us."[10] His intention was to liberate black theatre from white representational control. But for the "us" implied by DuBois, there was no public consensus about what it meant to write for "us." As recently as 1986, George C. Wolfe complained, "People kept asking for a `black' play. I kept asking, `What's a `black' play. Four walls, a couch and a mama?' I can't live within those old definitions."[11] His play, *The Colored Museum* satirically and explicitly combats past black theatrical stereotypes and operative conventions. Wolfe, like the aforementioned African American playwrights, seeks to create an alternative aesthetic and to construct a theatre that spoke for black people and to black people. And yet, this does not mean that he, writing in less overtly racially discriminatory times, is free from confronting other racialized conventions.

II

To be sure the construction of this alternative aesthetic has been particularly influenced by the social conditions of the times. The task of African American theatre history is to understand the contexts of construction but also to reflect on how playwrights and productions seek to negotiate that context. And yet, such a theatre history, I would contend, even as it reaches into the past can not be without an interest in the present. The Baldwin quote speaks to the importance of situating history in the present, "History is the present…You and I are history. We carry our history. We act our history". The notion of acting "our history" explicitly positions

10 W.E.B. DuBois, "Krigwa Little Theatre Movement,"*Crisis* XXXII (July 1926): 135.

11 George C. Wolfe, "'Colored Museum' Is Author's Exorcism," *New York Times*, 6 November 1986: 85

history as an engaged and interested performance that is as Elin Diamond states "both a doing and a thing done."[12] Far from a disinterested process that is supposedly free of biases and only concerned with finding facts, Baldwin imagines history not as static truth, but as malleable perceptions open to interpretation. Here I see a relation to Parks and Baldwin. For Parks "history does not serve me [her]" and thus she takes issue with it. Implicit in her comment is that history as currently constituted reflects a bias that is not in her interest. And so functioning in her own self-interest, she makes some up, she acts her own history. To the theatre historian self-conscious about truth claims and knowledge production, conceding the non-neutrality of facts and the partiality of one's location may seem antithetical to the project of historical research and discovery. And yet, only through the process of interpretation do facts come to meaning and this meaning is always subject to the politics of time and location. I am by no means arguing for an approach to theatre history that is overly presentist, imposing present values onto the past, but for writing or making history for the present moment. What I am advocating is a recognition of the given "interestedness" of any official history and thus the right of others to participate in the writing of history, whatever their self and racial interests, especially as compensation when writ out of the master histories.

Langston Hughes' play *Mulatto*, first produced in 1935, provides a notable exemplar of the "interested" nature of theatre history. Set after the first World War, *Mulatto* is the story of a son born of a white father, Colonel Norwood southern planter, and his black maid, Cora, who demands of his father what he, the son, understands as his just inheritance. Told from one perspective, *Mulatto*'s history is simply that it was the longest running play by a black author on Broadway before the 1959 award winning, now classic, play by Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*. A Broadway success despite mixed and even negative reveiws, *Mulatto* ran for 373 performances and then toured the United States for eight months before being produced in Italy by Italian actors where it ran for two years. Such a history may venerate the legacy of Hughes or may serve to promote black achievement through these statistics. Certainly this is a true history. And yet one must ask whose interest

12 Elin Diamond, "Introduction," *Performance and Cultural Politics*(New York: Routledge, 1996).

does such an interested history serve?

Another history, a history interested in uncovering the details of production, produces a very different story that is almost contradictory or at the very least one of competing interests. On this, his first Broadway production, Hughes worked with white writer and director Martin Jones, who had previously produced a successful race melodrama, Leon Gordon's *White Cargo*, on Broadway. Throughout their creative "collaboration," Jones treated Hughes with disdain, condescension and racism. Without Hughes' permission, Jones rewrote the third act of *Mulatto* to include a rape scene and a lynching, insisting to the novice playwright that he better understood Broadway commercialism. Jones' revision of *Mulatto* transformed Hughes' tragedy into a racialized sexual melodrama. The rape scene is only the climax in a long list of references to white men's desire for "yellow women," including Norwood's own oddly incestuous pinching of his daughter's flesh and calling her too "womanly" to have around. The play was even banned in Philadelphia for its overt sexuality. Certainly then, Jones's salacious marketing of the play's sexuality and racial violence contributed to *Mulatto*'s box-office success and longevity. Consequently, detailing the interactions between Jones and Hughes produces a history of racial exploitation in which Jones sought to emphasize the play's flirtation with racial taboos while attempting to obfuscate any message of social change or racial injustice in order to appeal to white desire.

At Hughes' and the play's expense, Jones sought to control the power of racial representation. Disturbingly, Jones had all the characters that Hughes had designated as "mixed black and white" played by white actors. Hughes, well versed in other forms of representation, wanted to control in dramatic performance the image of his characters by including detailed stage directions about how the near-white but clearly "Negroid," as he put it, mulatto actors who portrayed William, Robert and Sally, the children of the white Colonel Norwood and his black maid Nora, should look. Although black actors played the roles in Hughes' original reading of the play at Dobbs Ferry 1934, Jones, following the convention of the time, replaced them all with white actors for the Broadway production. In 1935 interracial productions on Broadway were far from the norm. (The 1935 Federal Theater Project Boston production of George Sklars' *Stevedore* created quite a stir, for example, because it

gave equal billing to its interracial cast of white actors and black actors.) Blacks were still traditionally relegated to minor servant roles other larger roles were played by whites in blackface. Jones's directorial behavior and theatrical sensibility reflected a racial paternalism that sought to keep the "upstart" black Hughes in his place. Jones intended to exercise his authority over Hughes to the latter's humiliation. Their conflict escalated when Jones resisted paying Hughes the required royalties and Hughes, like Robert the mulatto son in the play, demanded his legitimate due. Eventually, Hughes had to enlist NAACP legal counsel, Arthur Spingarn, to sue on his behalf. Hughes later complained that he didn't know why he was so invested in theatre when "drama was nothing but trial and tribulation to him."[13] To add insult to injury, Jones, perfectly willing to blur the color line in his cast selection, nonetheless imposed segregated house seating on all performances. In protest, Hughes boycotted the opening night of his own play.[14]

Yet a critical historicist approach to this production history can reveal that attempting to restrict how race means is a project inevitably doomed to failure. For, even though Jones cast white actors, he could not fully control how they signified in performance—in fact the mulatto's racial identity operates on a continuum within the play that is as much determined by the welter of reception and performance as by directorial or authorial designation. Within the moments of added racial and sexual violence of the play, the white actors become most particularly racialized as black.[15] For instance, Robert's sister Sally, the rape victim, assumes the role of the black temptress, who once was headed for a northern school now confesses she was just made for living after all. And when Robert's father dies, Robert becomes racialized

13 Duffy, 138.

14 Rampersad, 313-15. Interestingly, W.E.B. Du Bois makes a special point of criticizing Jones' sensational production of *White Cargo: A Play of the Primitive* in "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926): "In New York, we have two plays: 'White Cargo' and 'Congo.' In 'White Cargo' there is a fallen woman. She is black. In 'Congo' the fallen woman is white. In 'White Cargo' the black woman goes down further and further and in 'Congo' the white woman begins with degradation but in the end is one of the angels of the Lord…. In such cases, 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."

15 Those same white actors, we should note, playing the *near-white* actors who Jones treats as unequivocally *black* when it came to seating policies.

for white audiences as the black brute, the stereotypical image of black masculinity as predator, the representation seen in filmic images and media representations from "Birth of a Nation" onward. Robert becomes not just black man, but as Colonel Norwood states, "the kind of nigger that they hang from trees." Jones further loads this equation by having the son strangle the father, while Hughes' original script calls for the father to die of a heart attack due to the stress of his confrontation with his son. For black audiences, Robert's racialization in performance carries a different hue. Rather than victimizer he is victim, the black man who can be lynched, the image of black masculinity as always and already threatened. The irony here of course is that by attempting to reinscribe the stereotypes of black bestiality, Jones has whites assume and embody the racial type he sets up as antithetical to the "white" characters.

Mulatto informs and is informed by the racial politics of the 1930s and functions as an ironic example of the very conflicts it attempted to stage. Hughes' central figure, the mulatto son Robert does not want to be white; he wants to indict white status quo in his indictment of his white father. Similarly, Hughes, the author of nearly one hundred theatre pieces, had to struggle with white patriarchy throughout the production of this play. For African Americans there has always been a complicated relation with white father figures, the Founding Fathers of our nation for example, some of whom held slaves, all of whom questioned the utility of blacks as American citizens. Hughes' work on this play and his other mulatto projects troubles the interdependence of the nation and the father. For Hughes mulattos there is complex interdynamic of absence and denial within the white father figures and the desire of the son who wants to make the father's unmarked presence visible. Although the play ends with black suicide and a postmortem lynching of the son by the white community in the Jones stage version, the works need not simply be what has been called a "harrowing orchestration of Hughes' prophetic fear that the great house of America would be brought down by racial bigotry."[16] If *Mulatto* is apocalyptic in its vision, it also envisions the possibility of a black manhood rising Phoenix-like from the ashes—after all, Robert's climactic suicide is clearly represented by Hughes as an act of self-determination more than desperation. His

16 Rampersad, 315.

suicide is posed as the preemptive claiming of his life—taking his life "into his own hands" through the very act of taking his life "by his own hand." In the play the father's defensive denial of his son's manhood and later the white pathetic insistence on lynching the black youth even after he is dead, points up the increasing failure of white patriarchy to prevent the assertion and ascension of black manhood. While some critics have simply dismissed this play as Marxist-influenced agitprop or a literary death-scare "terror tactic,"[17] instead through reading its content in relation to its social context and in parallel with Hughes' own trials and commitment to social activism reveals *Mulatto* to be a complex symbolic "site…. wrapped up…. with a heap of signifying."[18]

III

Making history requires that we ask different questions of the past as we seek to understand the value of the past in the present. Marge Pierce writes, "The past leads us if we force it to. Otherwise it contains us in it asylum with no gates. We make history or it makes us." Rather than being contained within the asylum, the past can lead us to develop an alternative history; a concept of history that is not simply linear but the result of stops and starts, contested and contradictory moments and individual battles for subjectivity and identity. We see how such battles occur within the space and through the agency of dramatic text and performance. What if history is not teleological in that it presumes some future moment in which we can reflect on and understand the past, or deterministic in that in leads inexorably to a next preordained moment? What if history is not simply a master-narrative in which the great events are plotted? Then perhaps the particularity of individual lives, of the peculiar moment

17 Samuel A. Hay, *African American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994), 87.

18 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 379. Quoted in O'Meally and Fabre, 8. We place Hughes' representations within the context of other histories of emergent black masculinity—see David Dudley's *My Father's Shadow: Intergenerational Conflict in African American Men's Autobiography* (1991), Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson's *Cool Pose: The Dilemma of Black Manhood in America* (1992), Michael Awkward's *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (1995), Marcellus Blount and George Cunningham, eds., *Representing Black Men* (1995), Hazel Carby's *RaceMen* (2000) and Werner Sollers, ed. *Interracialism* (2001).

and idiosyncratic event can be represented. Within such representations lie the possibility of change and a chance for individual agency.

One important case in point comes from analyzing the most recent scholarship concerning the Black Arts Movement and Black Revolutionary theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s still stands out in African American theatre history as the most significant collective effort of black social protest theatre. The Movement not only advocated social change but cultural transformation through the institutionalization of a particularly black aesthetics. Contemporary critics have attacked the essentialism and misogyny of the Movement. From the late 1980s on through the 1990s up to our current age, criticizing the theatre of those earlier, urgent times for their restrictive identity politics and restrictive racial strategies became the vogue. The Black Arts Movement spoke specifically and exclusively to black audiences. It "preached to the converted." With a theoretical awareness of the constructed nature of race and the positionality and fluidity of cultural identity, critics and scholars, including myself, chastised LeRoi Jones and Ed Bullins and other Black Arts practitioners and theorists for their restrictive views of blackness and their exclusionary romanticized views on black aesthetics. While there is validity to these critiques, there are also theoretical limitations. Denigrating all paradigms and expressions of identity politics is simply too reductive. Far from a bankrupt concept, understanding identity as theoretically mediated and socially situated can provide insight into the complex relationship between social location and lived experience. How we perceive ourselves and are perceived, can have real consequence for projects of knowledge production as it effects how individuals view and experience the world.

Recently theorists such as Paula Moya and Michael Hames-Garcia, building on the ideas of Satya Mohanty and his book, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* have sought to "reclaim identity" by advocating a "postpositivist realist" approach that advocates for the recognition of identity's social, political and epistemic import.[19] They understand identity as being both real--having actual consequence--and being constructed. I do not have the space here to delineate this theory here, but I

19 Paula Moya and Michael Hames-Garcia, *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

do want to argue that revaluing identity can have an impact on theatre history studies in general and in particular on how we now imagine the history of the Black Arts Movement. Rather than dismissing the movement's identity claims under the rubric of essentialism, we can perhaps examine how certain notions of identity-- mediated by experiences of the times and the specific politics of locations-- informed the movement's campaign for social change and propelled its attempts to delineate an alternative theatrical aesthetic. We can create an alternative history.

Reevaluating to the Black Arts Movement offers the opportunity to perceive the movement differently and thus to make history. Accordingly, using theories of race and performance generally reserved for articulating the work of more contemporary theatre artists, Mike Sell in his reexamination of the Black Arts Movement maintains that rather than essentializing race, playwright Ed Bullins and his Black Arts compatriots constructed an avant-garde movement that employed blackness performatively and tactically. Sell notes that Bullins, when he served as editor of the now famous 1968 "Black Theatre Issue" of *The Drama Review* (*TDR*) developed an editorial strategy that was "structured by a polemical position and the strategic needs of revolutionary subjectivity."[20] In May 1968, *The Drama Review* (*TDR*) published its "Black Theatre Issue," edited by Bullins, marking a seminal moment in American Theatre history and heralding black theater's arrival as a radical intervention into the conventional practices and policies of American theater. Immediately after its publication, the "Black Theatre Issue" became a critical "collective manifesto" for the Black Theatre Movement (BTM) of the late 1960s and early 1970s. And yet, the devotion of an issue of *TDR* --the journal at the vanguard of the study and critique of contemporary performance trends and practices--solely to the texts and theorizations of black theatre needs reexamination for it is ripe with symbolic import, ideological contradictions and cultural politics. On one hand, the inclusion of the Black Theatre Issue in *TDR* symbolically incorporated black theatrical experimentation as an emerging force to be recognized in the American avant-garde. On the other hand, the racialized editorial policies and promotional strategies for this and only this issue emphasized its distinctness and separation from

20 Mike Sell, "[Ed.] Bullins as Editorial Performer: Textual Power and the Limits of Performance in the Black Arts Movement," *Theatre Journal,* 53.3 (October 2001): 419.

this same avant-garde. The Black Theatre Issue of *TDR* constitutes what Sell terms a "highly self-conscious performance of textual Blackness," that in its strategic deployment of black expressive resistance mocked and modeled avant-garde assaults on the audience.[21] Reread in this manner, the Black Theatre Issue not only resists assimilation into the standard notions of the American Avant-Garde but necessitates a call for a radical redefinition of the term.

With this approach to the Black Arts Movement and with the other examples I have used in this paper, I am suggesting a theatre history that is critically engaged and attends to the present as well as the past. Such a critical historicism requires not simply a reconsideration of the way data is organized and narrativized for specific ends; it also requires creatively theoretical interpretation. Such a notion of theatre history reflects, I believe, back to the Frederich Neitzsche quote on the art of history and history as art, "only if history can bear being transformed into a work of art, that is, to become a pure art form, may it perhaps preserve instincts or even rouse them." Nietzsche in "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life" rejects old "memorial" history and argues that "man" produces his own being and history is the record of that self-production. Thus "it is the activity of a historical being recovering the past into a present which anticipates the future."[22] This concept of history is not traditional but a particularized one ripe with cultural conflict and individual struggle that seeks to empower the present. Significantly, Nietzsche also argues that only by turning history into art and accentuating the art in history can we save history and produce a history that can really effect change. He imagines making art as making history in all senses. For theatre history perhaps we can see such a proactive creative strategy as critical to determining and performing a particular and progressive history making in the present. In closing I return to Suzan-Lori Parks who writes about her process of playwriting but speaks to the creative, critical historicism that I am advocating:

> Theatre, for me, is the perfect place to "make" history--that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered,

21 Ibid, 420.

22 Frederich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1980), 1.

washed out, one of my tasks as a 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.[23]

23 Suzan-Lori Parks, "Possession," *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: TCG Press, 1995), 4.