



## the cloudy history of *big white fog*

the federal theatre project, 1938

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In the last scene of Theodore Ward's play *Big White Fog*, a black man who has defied a notice of eviction is shot in the back by the sheriff while white comrades gather to join hands with the black man's family. Frightened by this display, the sheriff halts the eviction for the moment and leaves, as the people who remain—white and black—pledge to dispel the fog of prejudice, the miasma composed both of white man's racism and black man's defeatism. It is a familiar ending not peculiar to the 1930s although strongly associated with the

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FIGURE ONE (above): Act III, Scene III of Theodore Ward's "Big White Fog," Great Northern Theatre, Chicago, April, 1938: Victor lies dying, shot in the back while protesting his eviction; the comrades, black and white, who have come to help, watch from the doorway. Photographs in this article are courtesy of the Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collection at George Mason University Library. Reprinted by permission.

Depression—the bonding of the powerless (in this plot, the black and white working class) into a new coalition, a community that can wield power. But if this ending makes us long for such a moment of community, it can also make us wince at the seemingly naive idealism thus provoked. Experience tells us that moments of sympathy created by a spectator/reader's reaction to a performance/text often goes no further than a private expression of sympathy and hope. Explicit reformist literature, such as Ward's *Big White Fog*, bears the burden of history more directly than "imaginative" texts since art with designs to reform seems to demand that we measure whatever artistic merit it may have by investigating first its efficacy *as* reform. The discrepancy between Ward's hopeful ending to his play and the troubling divisions in the community which surfaced during the play's production will be the subject of this essay.

Since it was none other than the United States Government which produced *Big White Fog* in 1938 under the auspices of the Chicago Negro unit (a division of the Federal Theatre Project administered by the Works Projects Administration), the stakes of local and federal power and of racial and cultural power were about as high as they can come. Some of the best work, the most popular at the time and most memorable over time, was conceived and produced in the Negro units. It is here that one can most precisely reconstruct the path of one would-be American revolution, or, at the very least, a revolt against racial stereotypes of the theatre and racial segregation in the theatre. But those who believed they ought to fight the customs and traditions of American racism and racism within the theatre very often found themselves fighting amongst themselves about what the progressive or "new" Negro and Negro art should look like. One man's stereotype may be another man's livelihood; what may be normal behavior to one group may seem unnecessarily harsh, degrading, and untrue to another. The conflicts in the FTP's Negro units were between different political notions of how best to represent a progressive, racially democratic America.

*Big White Fog* can be studied as a particularly vivid example of how American culture is constructed. We do not usually see the choices, hesitations, prejudices, willful blindnesses, or popular preconceptions which both centrally and incidentally comprise the history of a cultural movement like the FTP. The memos, letters, production notebooks, oral interviews and reviews which concern *Big White Fog* all record how certain artistic and practical choices of how one comes to be represented shaped the representation itself. The point is not to trace the failure of a single production or merely to echo the liberal chorus in lamenting the sad demise of the FTP, but to set out some of the basic cultural conditions which made up this Project. An investigation into the schisms and differences of the various communities which had an interest in the initial production of Ward's *Big White Fog*—management; the artists including playwright, director, set designer and actors; and the audience—reveals the stumbling blocks that made the sort of political coalition envisioned in the play (either interracial or intraracial) so difficult to achieve. The contradictory concerns among blacks and whites, the stories they told about themselves and others, all together challenge the collective sense of "American" culture.<sup>1</sup>

## the cultural contradictions of a people's theatre

The conflicting responses which emerged from the representation of politics in *Big White Fog* certainly undermine the idea of collective culture. Many people considered it too inflammatory, "inciting race hatred"; while others saw it as a serviceable documentary, a kind of "social worker's notebook" designed to stir reform.<sup>2</sup> But some of these conflicting conclusions must be traced to the contradictions generated by Federal Theatre cultural beliefs. Both Hallie Flanagan, the head of the FTP, and Theodore Ward, the young and promising black playwright who was employed by the Chicago Negro unit, staked their careers on a belief in the possibility of a particular type of political and cultural revolution—one based not on individual effort but on communities empowered to define themselves. But it became clear to Flanagan as soon as the Project was funded in 1935 and to Ward, much to his bitter disappointment in 1938, that divisive battles were to be fought within each community over which of their parts would define the whole. Flanagan's efforts to create a national arena for Ward's art of cultural and political coalition floundered because of the very principle she wished to promulgate: people speaking for themselves, regionally and ethnically. Inescapable conflicts arose out of historical differences between and within regions and ethnic groups.

Although Flanagan firmly believed in extending democratic culture to the masses by making the theatre free or affordable, and by supporting new playwrights who wrote about people who were not at home in drawing room comedies, others held political interests and cultural beliefs which led them to block the spread of the Project. Local and federal WPA bureaucrats sometimes resisted the cultural programs of local Arts Project units.<sup>3</sup> Radically opposed views of appropriate theatre fare for the people were held within the FTP itself; some aimed to improve or uplift American culture, while others thought their business was to provide popular entertainment. The same people who extolled the virtues of popular art sometimes could not stomach what was actually produced, with the result that it was banished. Flanagan herself displayed this contradictory attitude. On one of Flanagan's early trips to Chicago she reports on the activity of the Negro unit with dismay:

The Negro Theatre got away to a good start because as we went in we were welcomed by the sign 'Federal Negro Theatre, W.P.A.' and adjoining it a huge legend 'Republican Headquarters for \_\_\_\_\_ District'. Even the Republicans would have liked our negroes playing with gusto a perfectly awful play called *Did Adam Sin*. I am not clear about Adam, but I certainly had a sense of guilt myself as I thought of spending taxpayers' money on this awful drivel. I am increasingly convinced that we must have a more autocratic choice of plays and certainly more rigid supervision.<sup>4</sup>

She certainly supported the Chicago Negro unit's *Swing Mikado*, a jazz adaptation of the *Mikado* which was a great hit for the FTP, but she was openly contemptuous of the vaudeville that many of the older actors on relief were

eager to do. Her preferences ran towards historical pageants and living newspapers. Flanagan's "highbrow" taste and her desire to uplift culture occasionally put her at odds with the "lowbrow" taste of some of the workers.

This cultural elitism was not, however, practiced solely by whites. Progressive black artists like Ward found themselves battling both the black middle class audience and black actors and directors who didn't regard "the people" in the same way. The misperceptions of audience desire along with the open rivalries and crossed ambitions of members of the Project point to a disquieting aspect of cultural construction: a people's desires for self-representation seem inevitably to involve a degree of exclusion (we are *this* way, not *that* way), stereotype, and mystification.

Yet "authentic" representation which *included* the excluded was the central political and cultural position of the black and white leaders of the FTP. No group in America had been so invidiously represented on stage and so relentlessly prevented from working backstage or enjoying the spectacle from the vantage of the orchestra. Excluded from the American theatre as playwrights, directors or designers, and prohibited as audience from attending white, segregated theatres, blacks had been represented on stage by whites in blackface or by black actors playing stereotyped parts.<sup>5</sup> Given these constraints, the black intelligentsia's focus in the 1920s and 1930s on the theatre as the place to create a new cultural type, the New Negro, seems puzzling, at least at first. The black critics of the twenties, principally W. E. B. DuBois and Alain Locke, were the key spokesmen for an indigenous black theatre, a theatre that would truly represent Afro-American people. Blacks, like the white liberal wing of the FTP, were interested in using theatre in new ways in order to promote cultural revolutions. Both held the common belief that going to "the people" for inspiration would result in an organic, more truly representative, Afro-American theatre and culture.

In 1926, DuBois sent out a call hoping to lure black artists back to Harlem to create a theatre exclusively *for* blacks. His manifesto combines a relatively uncomplicated notion of realism with one version of black essentialism:

The plays of a real Negro theatre must be: I. *About us*. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. II. *By us*. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. III. *For us*. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. IV. *Near us*. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.<sup>6</sup>

Alain Locke also had hopes for a theatre which would reflect the "true" character of the Negro. Like DuBois, he underscored the necessity for nurturing an indigenous black art form. Throughout the twenties, he proselytized on behalf of an African folk art, purified and uncontaminated by the history of the New World:

The creative impulse is for the moment caught in this dilemma of choice between the drama of discussion and social analysis and the drama of expression and artistic interpretation. But despite the present lure of the problem play, it ought to be apparent that the real future of Negro drama lies with the development of the folk play. Negro drama must grow in its own soul and cultivate its own intrinsic elements; only in this way can it become truly organic, and cease being a rootless derivative.<sup>7</sup>

That this new reality was to be “organic,” meaning uncontaminated by the germs of the dominant white culture, suggests Locke’s belief that it is possible to wash off the residue from the past and stand pure and converted.

While it might have been politically necessary to celebrate one set of historical roots over another, when Locke claimed that certain kinds of art can reveal life “as it [truly] is,” theoretical and practical problems arose. Realism, of course, depends upon a group of people agreeing about their categories, but the conventions of what is believed to *be* realism change drastically over time and between cultures. Notions of the real are always mediated by language, by specific cultures, by different historical circumstances. How does one reflect and appeal to an increasingly urban black population? By producing African folk plays? Social realism? Musical comedy? Which is more authentic? Who will decide?<sup>8</sup>

DuBois and Locke believed that they could fairly represent what was most authentic about the entire race. The distance between the black intellectual elite and the less educated became more apparent, however, when the two groups were placed in closer proximity. The black migration from the South to the North meant that these black intellectuals had to confront urban masses in Boston, New York and Washington; they could no longer base their theories on a distant southern folk. And the black masses could “look toward a range of other representatives which included black union organizations, economic radicals, or Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association.”<sup>9</sup> By the 1930s, “ordinary” blacks held widely divergent ideas about what constituted authentic black life, and black artists were equally divided among themselves. Ward’s advocacy in *Big White Fog* of interracial solidarity in the political arena thus seems to be at odds with DuBois’ and Locke’s support for a separate black culture, but the confusion and contradictions in the black intellectuals’ position allowed enough room for counter-statements to be made. The very call for adherence to what is “real” about American culture allowed for the expression of conflicting ideas about what constituted this disputed realm of culture.

In positing the Theatre Project as a theatre for all of the people, the FTP leaders could encompass DuBois’ hopes: the FTP was to be a theatre of, controlled by, and for different regions and ethnic groups. DuBois’ appropriation of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address dovetailed neatly with the populist rhetoric of the New Deal. “As you know,” one administrator wrote, “it is the desire of the Federal Theatre Project to establish the Negro unit in the Lafayette Theatre in New York as a negro theatre for negroes, rather than as a Harlem attraction

for downtown whites.”<sup>10</sup> Flanagan’s background in college teaching and experimental directing, her interest in and travels to Russian and European theatres, and her writing on American workers’ theatre, made it natural for her to turn her back on Broadway:

Practically the Federal Theatre will operate through the regional plan. . . . In other words, while recognizing New York City as the centre of American dramatic art, the Federal Theatre Project believes that the theatre horizon is expanding to include the Santa Fe desert, the Rocky Mountains, and the valley of the Mississippi; widening to include a consciousness of the social scene as well as the social register; widening, in short, to include the impossible—the same impossible which has led our contemporaries to soar to the stars, whisper through space, and fling miles of steel and glass into the air.<sup>11</sup>

Flanagan set up theatres in Miami, Omaha and San Bernardino, as well as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and numerous other cities; classical, experimental units, circus, marionette and children’s units; Spanish, French, Yiddish and Negro units spread throughout the United States.<sup>12</sup>

The promotion of a politically engaged dramaturgy was perhaps more evident in the Negro units than elsewhere. The creation of black companies along with the insistence that the theatres used by the FTP not be segregated constituted a major political and cultural statement. At the beginning of the FTP in 1935, sixteen of these units were established in places as far-flung as Durham, North Carolina, Seattle, Harlem and Los Angeles. Besides presenting an opportunity for many blacks to regain work in tough times, the FTP offered blacks a chance to take roles, on stage and off, which were not restricted to a stereotype and to explore seriously the dramatic problems of black people in contemporary society.<sup>13</sup>

From the start, the FTP was committed to supporting new American playwrights, and all hoped that black playwrights would appear with produceable plays.<sup>14</sup> But the scarcity of money and time along with the examples of censorship in the Negro units dissuaded all but the most determined.<sup>15</sup> The split nature of the audience, black and white, further complicated the black playwright’s task. Some banked on black folk plays, others on social realism, while many black actors, and white and black directors, just wanted to work and so were willing to act in and direct the plays, nearly all by white authors, that had sustained them in the past and which they felt would still be popular in the present. Although the claim would be made repeatedly that blacks were developing their own theatre from their unique point of view, the records show that a theatre of the “Negro” is at least as problematic a proposition as a theatre of “the people.”

In her memoir of the FTP, Flanagan described different projects in dramatic terms: “New York would have been staged as a living newspaper, Los Angeles as a musical comedy, the South as a folk play, and Chicago as melodrama.”<sup>16</sup> The Chicago Negro unit indeed had a particularly tempestuous history. Since

its beginning, struggles occurred over who should direct the unit and individual shows, as well as what sort of shows should be produced.<sup>17</sup>

By the time he arrived in Chicago, Theodore Ward's life read like a black version of a Horatio Alger story. He had transformed himself from a poor country boy to an educated urban intellectual. At the age of 13 he left Thibodaux, Louisiana and travelled around the United States working as a boot-black and a hotel bellboy. In Salt Lake City he somehow entered the University of Utah; one of his articles won him a scholarship to the University of Wisconsin where he worked at the radio station as a script writer and actor. After graduation, Ward moved to Chicago, became an instructor for the Lincoln Center Players in the black neighborhood of Chicago, met Richard Wright and joined the group of aspiring black writers in the Southside Writer's Club.<sup>18</sup> His journey from the South to the North mirrors those of thousands of blacks and his first play chronicles what happens to their dreams once they hit the big northern city.

The plot of *Big White Fog* relentlessly uncovers the ways in which the attempt of black working-class people to fashion themselves into one middle-class type or another, their aspiration for a piece of the middle-class American pie—a business, an education, a comfortable home—is impossible given America's racism and capitalist system. Ward argues that the democratic cornerstone, "of, by, and for the people," only pertains to certain people; herein lies the central contradiction of democratic rhetoric. Everyone in *Big White Fog* has a dream and the play chronicles the excruciating business of watching dreams undercut, exposed as illusions. The fog of white prejudice not only frustrates the aspirations of this particular black family, but alters how the family members feel about each other and about themselves. Of all the socially realistic plays written for the FTP about the black condition I think *Big White Fog* had the potential to be the most troubling to its Chicago audience. Unlike *Turpentine* or *Sweetland*, two problems plays about black sharecroppers in the South, performed by the Harlem FTP Negro unit, *Big White Fog* takes up the condition of urban blacks in the North, the very people most likely to see this play. Ward carefully shows not only the cultural contradictions of American rhetoric but how these contradictions infect the complicated and contradictory desires of the urban black family.

The play begins in 1922 when Vic moves his family from the South to Chicago because he hopes that in the northern city his family will find freedom. Vic has been educated as a scientific farmer, but he cannot buy land in the South. Unfortunately, Chicago does not open its arms to this man either, in spite of the promises that in the North the black man is free, and he is lucky to find menial construction work. This proud man becomes persuaded by Marcus Garvey's argument that only in Africa will the black man prosper. In the meantime, his mother-in-law will not let him forget his failure and goads him, laughing at his belief in Garvey. She prides herself on her white blood and taunts her son-in-law, Vic, with his black skin: "No Dupree would-er thought 'bout marryin' sich a *black* crank in the first place."<sup>19</sup> The grandmother's self-esteem as a black woman has been fogged up by the power

white blood symbolizes. Vic's Garveyism allows him to damn her mulatto blood as a sign of degradation.

His brother-in-law believes that the Garveyites are all "bunk" and that the only way to advance is to become a capitalist; he urges Vic to invest his money in real estate—kitchenettes—which they can rent to the flood of black people moving north. But Vic doesn't want to make money, or at least the thought of capitalizing on poor blacks doesn't appeal to him. He dreams of the dignity of black leadership and the power of education. But when Vic learns that his son, Les, who had been promised a scholarship to attend college, has been rejected because the authorities have found out that he is black, he donates all of his money to the Garveyites in his disgust and disappointment. Even when he learns that Garvey has been jailed, convicted and finally deported, that the ships have sunk, and his own bonds are worthless, Vic still holds to the nationalist dream because it is all he has.

The final act opens ten years after this disaster, in the midst of the depression, the audience's present. Vic's brother-in-law is now a ruined businessman, and Vic and his family are about to be evicted. Vic's daughter offers herself to a white man in order to get enough money to save her parents from eviction. Vic's wife stops talking to him because she blames him for the disintegration of their family. But the son, Les, thinks he has a solution to their problems. He has been listening to friends who argue that "the only lasting solution for the problem of minority groups today is unity with the majority on a common

**FIGURE TWO:** Act I, Scene I of Theodore Ward's "Big White Fog," Great Northern Theatre, Chicago, April, 1938: the Mason family at home. Victor greeted by his wife Ella, and the rest of the family.





ground. . . . It may sound remote. But what's there to prevent all the underprivileged from getting together on problems in which they have a common interest?" (301). With the sweeping naive good will typical of the Popular Front rhetoric, the fact that prejudice might block the "common interest" of the people is swept away by thoughts like these: ". . . I'm beginning to wonder if it isn't a matter of simply being just distrustful" (301).

Events happen quickly in the last five minutes: Vic decides to fight the eviction; the comrades, white and black, arrive to help the family; offstage Vic blocks the sheriff from entering into the house; and then the audience hears a shot. The sheriff has shot Vic in the back, and as Vic is brought back on stage we hear the comrades off-stage swelling the ranks; the sheriff tells his men to back off. Vic is dying in despair, feeling that he lost this battle too, but his son points out to his father the crowd off stage; a personal tragedy seems mitigated by the vision of a brotherhood and its power to stare down authority, at least momentarily.

Ward organizes his drama around the breakdown of different black communities: political, economic, familial. Separately, these communities cannot be sustained as sites of resistance. Only when the largest community—comprised of all people, white and black—bonds together can a family or nation be healed. Ward's belief in the power of community to overturn the existing powers was to be put to the test in the ensuing production. The divided community of the play is no more fragmented than the FTP staff and audience, who were divided about what the work represented, where it should be produced, and even *if* it should be produced.

As a play written *by* a black man, *about* black people, *Big White Fog* fits DuBois' manifesto. But the different responses people had to the production show that people disagreed over just who the play was *for*. The divided response to this work from both blacks and whites reveals that Ward's polemic against race hatred and his belief in class solidarity struck all kinds of nerves. *Big White Fog* may or may not have been progressive, depending on one's own stand on class warfare and racial prejudice; it did, however, cause people to reveal on which side of the political spectrum they stood.

### the production history

The initial question of where it should be produced should be examined in terms of cultural construction. DuBois would have said, *Big White Fog* should be produced "near us," in a black neighborhood, but Ward wanted the widest possible response: the Loop and an interracial audience. Given the play Ward wrote, an interracial audience made sense. Quite clearly in this play, DuBois' separatist manifesto—of, by and for blacks—had been superseded by the cultural Popular Front policy. *Big White Fog* endorses a coalition of black leaders, left-wing liberals and communists, white and black. But this same group could not be counted on to give the unqualified support to the production that Ward had counted on in his plays.

Harry Minturn, the acting director of the Chicago Project in 1937, was initially reluctant to book *Big White Fog* into a Loop theatre, but hoped that a

theatre might be found for it on the Southside. However, it would be a mistake to think that Minturn backed DuBois' separatist ideals. Minturn did not have a record of misunderstanding the black theatrical community; he would come to direct the wildly successful *Swing Mikado*, and after the demise of the FTP would help organize a Negro Light Opera Company with members from the *Swing* cast. But he was not a New Dealer with a cultural mission to erase stereotypes and create new roles for blacks. The acting director's theatrical specialty was vaudeville and musicals, and these vaudeville instincts probably told him that social realism about the black condition wouldn't entertain white folks although it might appeal to blacks. Minturn felt at home with the song and dance forms of the musical, which used blacks in a "traditional" entertainment setting. Hoping that a theatre might be found for this realist play on the Southside in the black community, he sent a black director from the Negro unit to drum up support within the black community for such a neighborhood theatre.<sup>20</sup>

Shirley Graham, who was to become better known after her FTP days as Shirley Graham DuBois, the wife of W.E.B., was the black director Minturn sent out to scout for a black audience and theatre. Graham was 40 years old when she accepted a job on the FTP. Having taught at various colleges, she was among the handful of trained black musicologists, having earned an undergraduate and master's degree from Oberlin College. Her master's thesis was entitled "The Survival of Africanism in Modern Music." A one-act play she had written at Oberlin, *Tom-Tom*, had been produced as an expanded three-act opera in Cleveland, *Tom-Tom: An Epic of Music and the Negro*. Visiting a brother in Chicago, she heard that there might be a job for her on the Negro unit, interviewed with the regional director, George Kondolf, and accepted a job as a director in the Negro unit. Kathy A. Perkins argues that: "Like many Blacks of her generation, Graham was educated and socialized according to the philosophy of 'uplift' and DuBois's concept of 'the talented tenth'—to aid Blacks in whatever way possible. Growing up in a racist society with a fierce sense of race pride, ambition and dedication, Graham wanted to make a great artistic contribution to 'uplifting' her people."<sup>21</sup> Very few, if any, blacks served in supervisory positions in Chicago, and certainly Graham was highly trained, committed to black music, and a catch for the Negro unit.

Graham played a central role in the production of *Big White Fog*, mediating between Minturn's grudging support, Ward's progressive views, and the black and white communities' nervous anticipation of a race riot. Her position of power stemmed from the fact that Minturn would act upon her ability to find out what "her" people wanted. Like the entire white bureaucratic elite of the FTP, Minturn operated under the belief that one could find out what a supposedly monolithic people desired. Graham understood the power such a belief generated. Her role was to represent her people's needs and to reconcile conflicting desires by deciding between them if necessary, so that she could speak with one voice when she reported to the head of the Project. Like DuBois, she saw herself as one of the chosen, one of the black elite who straddled two worlds: she understood aesthetics from the perspective of the elite and judged from that point of view the aesthetic limitations of folk art.

She also understood the politics which generated both Ward's progressive art and the reaction against it by certain parts of the black community.

In a letter to a friend at the Washington Conservatory of Music, Graham writes in November of 1937 to complain about the Chicago Negro unit: "Chicago is the hardest place in the world for an 'outsider' to attempt anything which involves a group of Negroes. I found that out much to my sorrow. . .

Frankly, the Negroes here care for only one thing—money. The city as a whole is utterly devoid of cultural interests." Graham finds that her commitment to uplift the cultural life of her people is frustrated by the crass concerns which pervade Chicago; she continues, "Standards are set by Joe Louis and Al Capone."<sup>22</sup> A trained musicologist, a black woman, was going to find it hard to be an arbiter of taste in Chicago. The tone of frustration and contempt which clearly emerges in this private letter to her friend is tempered, however, in her official capacity on the Negro unit.

Minturn directed Graham to find a place for the play in the black community. She knew from the moment she read *Big White Fog* that the black community in Chicago had not seen a play like this before. *Big White Fog* was "so very different that I couldn't be sure of it. . . ."<sup>23</sup> She decided to hold a "preview" at the YWCA on the Southside, having Ted Ward read his play, with the white director, Kay Ewing, there to answer questions. She invited representatives from the NAACP and the Chicago Urban League, black and white dramatic groups, black churches, funeral associations, black music clubs and selected fraternities—"groups which I had reason to believe would not be unfriendly on that score." Up to this point, she says she supported the play; aside from "some tightening up and some minor changes . . . I thought it had definite theatre possibilities." But that evening she changed her mind. In a letter to Minturn explaining why she no longer thought the play should be produced, she writes that her initial enthusiasm had been based on reading *Big White Fog* as a 'play' and as 'theatre': "I am used to going to the theatre, perhaps I have fewer inhibitions than people whose lives have been more limited. But certainly my second reading did reveal dangers of which I had not thought before." These "fewer inhibitions" had allowed her to overlook the effect this play's critique of society would have on others deemed less sophisticated. People whose lives have "been more limited"—the condescension rings out here—might not be able to separate an aesthetic experience from a political one.

If Graham could think solely in dramatic terms, Ward and the black audience invited to the reading could not. Ignoring the dramatic nature of the play and concentrating on its representation of black middle-class urban life framed the ensuing struggle in terms of realism and stereotype. Immediately, people contested Ward's plot as realism, a portrayal of life "as it is. Everyone began to see that to produce *Big White Fog* meant producing a certain version of history, certain cultural attitudes and biases. The drama lay not in the words of the play but in the fears and outrage expressed by the people listening to that first reading.

In Graham's letter to Minturn she goes on to describe the reactions blacks had to the reading they heard that night:

Nobody attacked the play that night. Everybody was courteous and everybody showed intelligent interest. A few questions were asked and then everybody dispersed *without doing anything*. But that night Miss Ewing made one remark which has since been repeated all over the south side. From where I was sitting in the back of the room I caught that reaction and became aware of this unexpected danger. The remark simply was, "This play is so absolutely typical of the Negro family in Chicago." Miss Ewing said this in all sincerity and with the best intention in the world, but it has been resented and repeated a hundred times. People have said to me, "This play is *not* representative of us. We *do* have many successful business men in Chicago—our sons *do* get scholarships—we *do* support our own businesses—black *men* are respected not only in their own homes, but throughout the community—our respectable women do not keep all kinds of rooming houses—and our girls *do not* have to sleep with white men to get fifty dollars."<sup>23</sup>

When Graham reread the play with these thoughts in mind she began to believe that it would offend almost the entire black community: the church leaders who were opposed to the communist ending; the people who saw the possibility of advancement through education and hard work; businessmen who believed in the opportunities of free enterprise; and the West Indians who were sensitive about their memories of Garvey. She wrote, "Mr. Minturn, the problem of color *within* [the] Negro race is rather difficult for a white person to understand. No Negro can escape it. This play does tear open old sores and leaves them uncovered and bleeding. . . . Miss Ewing sincerely believes that the play will further the cause of an oppressed people, but I fear that its production at this time will do immeasurable harm to the very people it is attempting to help."

The controversy continues to be expressed in terms of who represents whom most authentically. As mediator between blacks and whites, Graham first carefully asserts her power to give a more authoritative version of what is at stake for blacks than the white director. Whites, no matter how well-meaning, just do not understand how certain sorts of representation affect blacks. She mentions the "problem of color," referring, no doubt, to the grandmother's castigation of her son-in-law as a dark black crank. Graham never says that Ward gets it wrong but that his play is insensitive to the feelings of his black audience; his portrait of black life hurts too much and divides the community. She now begins to see how a production of the play could have political consequences by harming "the cause."

Graham does not state exactly what cause she had in mind: working-class solidarity, black pride, civil rights, the elimination of prejudice? But the cause that Ewing, the director, and Hal Kopel, the set designer, were concerned with is unmistakable. They firmly believed in the realism of the play and were bolstered by their feeling that the black actors concurred with them and with Ward. Further, they believed that in representing the Negro more "realistically," and in rejecting old stereotypes they were helping an oppressed people to shake off the slurs and internalizations of hatred thrust upon them by people in power. Ewing testified that the set seemed to fit the circumstances so well that when

the actors walked onto the set “they settled down in it as if they had always lived there.”<sup>24</sup> But the designer seems to have been confused about whether this family was primarily constituted by their difference or similarity to white families of the same class: “While the play is about the Mason family, one feels that it is really talking about the whole Negro race, and the setting, instead of trying to show an individualized Negro home[,] tried to give the essence of all Negro homes. ‘How is a Negro home different from the homes of his white neighbors?’, and the answer, in the designer [sic] opinion, is that it is not different.”<sup>25</sup> Kopel wants it both ways: to distinguish blacks from whites by talking about the whole Negro race and yet at the same time to insist that one race is not *really* different from another.

Accurate or stereotype, authentic or unrepresentative—these were the concepts at work when the people of Chicago fought for their own particular construction of reality. Graham collected responses from those who had attended to support her recommendation that the play not be produced. Most of these were negative. The NAACP felt that the FTP wanted to rid themselves of the controversy by asking the local population to support it; the organization objected to the play’s “communist propaganda” which seemed to present “some of the worst phases of Negro life.” The representative from the Illinois State Employment Office believed that they wouldn’t be able to muster the necessary publicity or support without the FTP behind it.<sup>26</sup> Other responses, even favorable responses to the play, expressed wariness as to how it would be received. Mrs. Bertha Lewis, Chairman of the Dramatic Committee Northern District of Colored Women’s Clubs, acknowledges that the “‘propaganda’ had been skillfully handled . . . [but] I doubt if any regular white theater audience would be interested in so many of our problems.” Mrs. Pearl Pachoco, from the Richard B. Harrison Dramatic Club, admired “the dramatic force” of the play, but “would not care to invite the white sponsors of their club to attend the play.”<sup>27</sup> The only theatre commitment Graham secured was for a two day engagement at the International House of Chicago, but when the director came back from out of town (or got wind of the plot of the play), he pulled out, citing fear of “inter-racial hatred” as his excuse.<sup>28</sup>

These exchanges as reported by Graham suggest that the black constituency which the FTP could hope to lure into the theatre—urban, and for the most part professional, middle-class race leaders—resisted mightily being lumped into what they considered a “typical” portrait of the Afro-American citizen, especially one that depicted them as losers and second-class citizens. One must surmise that these people did not identify with Vic’s family and others in their predicament; or at least did not want such an identification made, and especially did not want whites to make that identification. The NAACP as well as the funeral and church associations resented what they sum up as the defeatist portrait of the black community; they were unwilling to give up gradualist politics for the revolutionary ending Ward offered. Graham was clearly sensitive to those who tried to stress the successes of black people rather than the failures and was herself more comfortable with the rhetoric of celebration and uplift than with the strident criticism of Ward’s play.<sup>29</sup>

When the representative from the NAACP said that the play emphasized the “worst phases of Negro life” he did not acknowledge that Wards’ portrayal stressed how these conditions were caused by racism. Yet he clearly was preoccupied with how the play would be interpreted by the white community. Expressing the same unease evinced by certain parts of the black community toward Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, he implicitly worried how certain representations about black life might be used against them. Certain black leaders disliked being portrayed as losers, victims or revolutionaries, and they resented the effort that was made to promote this image seemingly at their moral expense.

One other strike was levelled against the play in Graham’s letter to Minturn: she doubted whether this drama as problem play could fill a theatre with a black or white audience: “The average colored audience, even more than the average white audience wants to be entertained. Problem plays do not as a whole interest people not in the habit of going to the theatre.”<sup>30</sup> F. T. Lane, an official from the Chicago Urban League, wrote one of the only letters of support for the production to Graham, praising the truthfulness of the racial situation. But he too seemed to believe that the play probably would not have a wide appeal because it would seem too much like a “true story from a social caseworker’s notebook.” Could the playwright perhaps lighten the tension, he wondered.<sup>31</sup> This dichotomy between what the people “wanted”—entertainment—and what the socially committed playwright wished to give them—problem plays—haunted many of the Negro units because the popular forms of entertainment, vaudeville, minstrel shows and musicals, were the vehicles by which black actors had made their mark. Black and white theatrical audiences apparently expected to be entertained, as ever, by familiar black stereotypes. Of course an even wider cultural dilemma presents itself here: every political playwright on the Project, black and white, shared the problem of attracting a popular audience who wanted to be soothed and entertained in the theatre, not agitated toward change.<sup>32</sup>

After receiving Graham’s letter, Minturn was more reluctant than ever to place the play in a downtown theatre. In a letter to Flanagan he argued that “serious thought” should be given to the problem of inciting race hatred. Although he never explains what Ward would have to change or even where race hatred lies, he writes: “If the script could be rewritten to eliminate that, then I can see no reason for its not being done.” Then he complains that Ewing and Kopel have unfairly accused him of putting the play on hold, when the real reason for the delay is that all of the Loop theatres had been booked.<sup>33</sup> With his black deputy telling him about serious dissension in the black community, and his own misgivings based on his theatrical experience, Minturn had more than enough reason to block production of the play.

Ted Ward never forgot or forgave the principals in this case. He dismissed the fears expressed by Minturn and Graham as trumped up excuses to sabotage his play. In an oral interview in 1976, Ward said that the problem, as he saw it, was Graham’s jealousy over the appointment of Kay Ewing as director of *Big White Fog*; Ewing happened to be not only white but a rich former student of Flanagan’s at Vassar.<sup>34</sup> According to Ward’s account, Graham spread the rumor that the play was defeatist in order to sink it: “I thought the whole thing

was confined to the ambition of a Negro woman who was not prepared really to become the instructor or the supervisor of anything else in the Negro unit, but whose ambition was to be head of the Project which she couldn't keep."<sup>35</sup> Ward went on to claim that Minturn was in league with Graham and that Minturn later showed him the letters from the black community in an effort to absolve himself of the charge that he obstructed the production.

Ward's accusations—that his production was ambushed not by lack of black community support but by Graham's jealousy and ambitions—underscores her centrality, though they also cloud her role as mediator. Ward's interpretation of Graham's motives is not unreasonable. She clearly was ambitious and she was known to be the one black principal in the Chicago unit, anointed by Flanagan herself. That Graham was passed over for a white woman, one with her own ties to the head of the FTP, might well have galled her. Periodic rumblings about the shortage of blacks in positions of power emerged from many of the Negro units. Although they were conceived as theatres for blacks, only *one* of the sixteen Negro units had a black director from start to finish, and most of the individual productions were directed by white men.<sup>36</sup> Ward's interpretation, however, dismisses Graham's attention to the black audience and ignores the fact that her reading takes their voices and concerns seriously. The differences between Ward's and Graham's political agendas played themselves out in the "aesthetic" realm. Her sympathy for celebratory works of art was in line with attitudes of a certain part of the black middle class, while such celebration to Ward seemed exactly the kind of cloudy obfuscation which hindered a clear view of reality.

Ward did not blame only Graham, however. He also believed that the white politicians were confused as to what the black community really wanted. He remembers that after Minturn blocked the play, a prominent black woman named Mrs. Hale went downtown and said her people were eager to see *Big White Fog*. The white administration "didn't know which way they were going and they were not going to alienate [the] blacks on the South Side and prominent Negro businessmen."<sup>37</sup> In a surprising turnaround, perhaps because the Chicago city administration brought pressure on the WPA, *Big White Fog* did finally go into the Great Northern—a theatre on the Loop, home of the FTP's more experimental productions. It played in Chicago between April 7 and May 30, altogether for 37 performances, and its success, in front of a mixed audience, no doubt surprised Graham and Minturn even more. Whites seemed to be very interested in the problems of blacks; no race riots resulted, nor were the fires of interracial hatred fanned; and reviews in black as well as white journals were favorable.

All speculation about audience and culture was proven wrong. *Big White Fog* managed to find an audience willing to sit through a problem play. It did not generate class solidarity, neither did it overcome racial schisms. Each of the principals had acted like a cultural commissar, attempting to dictate the events surrounding this play. Each commissar had spoken of the black community as a monolithic entity: Minturn believed the community did not want to be instructed and preached to; Graham believed the black community did not want to be represented as defeated; the City administration did not know what to

believe the black community wanted; Mrs. Hale believed that City Hall did not know what the black community truly wanted and so she told them.

The idea of a unitary black entity continues, however, with the reviews of the production. All of the objections and reasons for putting on the play reappear in these reviews but are reassigned to different effects. Ideas of what is natural or representative are used to contain and neutralize Ward's critique of racism and capitalism, so that what *Big White Fog* comes to stand for and celebrate is America's ability to tolerate criticism. The play now serves entirely different cultural ends from those imagined by those who thought it might start riots or those who hoped it might further the cause of an oppressed people. Universalizing the historical specificity of Ward's play undercuts its usefulness as either a progressive or retrogressive political force. The reviews succeed in returning the play to the safer arena of "art."

Consensus held it a talky but honest, sincere play—a description meaningless in its generality, yet telling us that the play struck the reviewers as an authentic representation of black life.<sup>38</sup> While little mention was made of the form of the play or its direction, the quality of the acting received much attention. The actors' naturalness seemed to enforce the sense of realism: "It is a sheer joy to watch these federal theatre Negro players in action," one reviewer wrote: "Their voices are as sweet as honey. They are as much at ease on the stage as in their own homes. They have a mellow sense of humor through which runs the deep undercurrent of native pathos of their race."<sup>39</sup> "Native pathos" denies the way pathos comes to seem natural when it is so deeply inscribed by the historical situation of black men and women in America. The expression also denies the skill of the actors. "Native pathos" stresses a version of essentialism that constructs a passive and even doomed black race.

The review in the *Chicago Tribune* casts the play in a historical light that manages to distance the portrayal of conflicts from contemporary society: "This work deals with the domestic life of Negroes in Chicago and in particular with one family whose head follows the Marcus Garvey movement ('back to Africa') into heartbreak and economic disaster. . . . In its handling of the Garvey episode the play has some value as an imaginative footnote to recent Negro history."<sup>40</sup> To cite Vic's adherence to the Garvey movement as the reason for the tragedy obscures the reasons why Vic chose to follow Garvey in the first place.

In Hallie Flanagan's history of FTP, *Arena*, her brief recollection of Ward's play ignores any of the conflicts I have described. In her desire to defend the FTP from the charges made that the organization was riddled with communists and communist sympathizers, she soft-pedals the working class ending to emphasize instead the racial story:

[T]his script carried no political definition. . . . *Big White Fog* was important because it dealt with a racial problem by a member of the Negro race, and because, as Charles Collins pointed out in the *Tribune*, it afforded an authentic footnote to recent Negro history in recording the Marcus Garvey Back-to-Africa movement which originated in Chicago.<sup>41</sup>



Her official version glosses over the political controversies that arose *in* the play, not to mention those that arose over the production. To sum up the play as dealing with “a” racial problem by “a” member of the Negro race undercuts Ward’s pointed political critique of *American* racism.

As to the overtly political ending of the play, allowances were made for its enthusiastic support of a “brotherhood.” Gail Borden of the *Daily Times* defends *Big White Fog* because a free America should not ban or suppress anything:

Only recently . . . there have been letters passed around suggesting that the mayor do something about stopping the production of “Big White Fog” on the grounds that it is “Communitistic” (which it probably is) and that it incites race prejudice (which it probably does not). And we disagree with these objections more than with the moral of the play, for the pure and simple reason that we believe in free speech whether on the stage or off. . . .

To oppose the use of the theater as a loudspeaker for a writer’s social beliefs is to relegate the theater to the dullness of romantic repetitive twaddle. Also when the playhouses are “controlled” America is showing that it is no better than those Utopias from which it tries to protect us and for which so many ardent young playwrights yearn.<sup>42</sup>

In this view the play functions as a Voice of America program booming around the world, touting the greatest feature of the United States: free speech. The play’s content--class warfare, civil rights, its sharp criticism of the United States--becomes absorbed in the general congratulatory point that citizens can criticize their government freely.

The final performances of *Big White Fog* raise more questions about how people wanted to use the play and why others responded to the play in the ways they did. Ward tells how, in spite of the good reviews and the sizable mixed audience the play attracted, Minturn decided to move it to a black high school auditorium on the Southside. There the play closed in a matter of days. Why did Minturn pull the play from the Loop? And even more troubling, why did it fail to sustain an audience in the black community? A variety of explanations, none of which proves definitive, make a master narrative of this final puzzling event impossible. Ward felt that the policies of the FTP at this moment in history were a convenient excuse for Minturn’s personal antipathy to his political play. By 1938, funds for the FTP had been reduced by Congress several times; in turn Flanagan had been forced to cut many of the Projects’ regional or outlying projects when accompanying support from the community had been low. In a Catch-22 situation, the FTP was then criticized by Congress for being too narrowly based in major cities. Wherever possible for political public relations and for ideological reasons (Flanagan supported, of course, the idea that the theatre should be extended to those outside New York City), the FTP tried to maintain the ethnic theatres in the big cities. Minturn had earlier written to Flanagan that his idea was to book *Big White Fog* on the Southside as a community gesture; it would save blacks carfare and “would be a neigh-

borhood theatre the same as many of your outlying theatres in New York, servicing that particular locality.”<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, it could be that Minturn was using FTP policies as an excuse to close the show. Ward remembers Minturn’s “official” reason for moving the play along these lines: “So Minturn retired the play to the south side to a Negro high school, saying the [*Big White Fog*] was [a Negro play and that the] Negroes need to know [it].”<sup>44</sup> But according to Ward, Minturn was out to destroy “black social theatre.”<sup>45</sup> Moving *Big White Fog* out of the Great Northern where it was doing fine may have been a combination of a policy that was designed to placate politicians in Washington, assuring them that everybody was getting a piece of the pie; a gesture to show continuing support for ethnic theatres; or a capitulation to those who criticized the play’s communism.

Perhaps Ward was right; Minturn certainly was unsympathetic toward social realism. But the paradoxical equation that black social theatre is destroyed once placed within a black neighborhood remains more troubling. Ward continued: “So [Minturn] moved . . . [the play from the Loop to] the South Side, and that was the same as killing it, you see, because what do the Negroes know about going to the high school to see a play?”<sup>46</sup> One fact remains absolutely clear: the Southside production closed in four days because it had no audience. But why should it be the case that moving it to the Southside was the same as killing it? Here we can only speculate. The amount of advertising or promotional work done for this production is not known. No audience surveys were collected this late in the FTP’s history. We have seen that the black community was divided about the play before it opened, but that black audiences *did* travel to see *Big White Fog* when it was on the Loop, when it seemed to be approved by establishment critics. It seems likely that the presence of whites in the audience, their visible support along with whatever complex validation they afforded the event, was an important factor in attracting blacks. No matter what else it does, moving a production from an established theatre in the middle of the theatre district to a high school auditorium certainly sends a strong signal that the FTP did not think the play was worthy of a professional production.

These tentative hypotheses to many of the questions surrounding *Big White Fog* do not reveal essential or absolute truths but instead reflect the fluctuating ways in which life is represented. The controversy over what a “typical” black family looked like or whether a certain play would be politically progressive reveals that people are persuaded, or dissuaded, by ideas of what they think is representative. To Shirley Graham, Ewing blundered the night she declared her belief that this was a typical Negro family. A realism based on the typical in this case only brought to the surface the differences between “the people,” making it clear, at least within the black community, if not outside it, that the meaning of the typical was to be contested. Even now, looking back, it is hard to choose between conflicting stories: was it jealousy, ambition or concern for people’s feelings that motivated the dissent of Shirley Graham; was the FTP protecting itself from an increasingly hostile Congress about to launch a full scale investigation into the perceived radical influence on the project? How much power should we assign to individual actions and how much to institutional policies or deep-set ideologies?

The embarrassing contradiction of writing plays for the people who then reject them plagued Ward—and others—on the FTP. Just two years after its premiere, when the Negro Playwright Company in New York revived *Big White Fog*, critics resoundingly attacked the play for the Communist ending. This makes sense, on the eve of World War II. However, Ward still had to face the fact that the Harlem community did not support the play. Ward's explanation—"We thought that the Negro audience was ready for the theatre in 1940, but the group needed a larger sense of understanding"—echoes the sentiments of many others on the FTP.<sup>47</sup> Langston Hughes agreed with Ward that people weren't "ready": "It is the greatest encompassing play on negro life that has ever been written. If it isn't liked by people, it is because they are not ready for it, not because it isn't a great play."<sup>48</sup> As politically progressive black artists, Hughes, Ward and Wright could be just as condescending as the more conservative Graham or the liberal Flanagan when it came to the audience they tried to reach. From their point of view, the black audience appeared unsophisticated, uneducated, parochial in its understanding. From the point of view of some parts of the black audience, the artists seemed bent on destroying their self-respect. Ward's dilemma mirrored the dilemma faced by the FTP: in reaching out to people who hadn't been heard from before and who were given a chance to express themselves, Ward and others like him might encounter the voice of a nay-saying people. This was not yet a theatre by the people.

Battles very like the one in Chicago took place in other units of the FTP. Audience surveys collected in Harlem and Los Angeles show that black audiences in those cities were in sharp disagreement about what they wanted to see in the theatre. The NAACP raised an outcry over the staging of an Octavus Ray Cohen play in New Jersey. The drama was finally withdrawn, but the FTP administrator was quick to point out that it was black actors in that unit who had suggested the play in the first place. If blacks did not always agree on how they ought to be represented artistically, even more desperate fights between blacks and whites broke out over how blacks should be represented administratively, not only on the FTP but on the other Arts Projects as well. Sterling Brown, the head of the office of Negro Affairs, a division of the Federal Writers' Project, tried time and time again to force white southern writers to get rid of the stereotyped, folksy descriptions of colorful black traditions. Certain kinds of art were deemed more "natural" for blacks: jazz rather than classical music; African "primitive" forms rather than the traditions of Western art; folk tales rather than experimental writing. *More* representation of blacks was in order, but what sort was open to dispute.<sup>49</sup> Research into the records of the 1930s Arts Projects reveals the problematic and fragmented nature of the collective noun "the people." The expression of pluralism was never fully honored by the progressive leadership of the FTP, the heads of black organizations or even by artists on the Projects. Instead we can see in reviews, memos and interviews how everyone involved in the FTP Negro units sought to present a consensus, to suppress conflict in order to set him- or herself up as the true representative of this "unheard" people. Studying the various reasons for the failure of consensus which occurred in the FTP's Negro unit allows us to hear the voices of people who previously lacked access to major cultural institutions.

Until these voices are added to a “larger” understanding of cultural representation, an art for “the people,” by the people will be impossible.

Pomona College

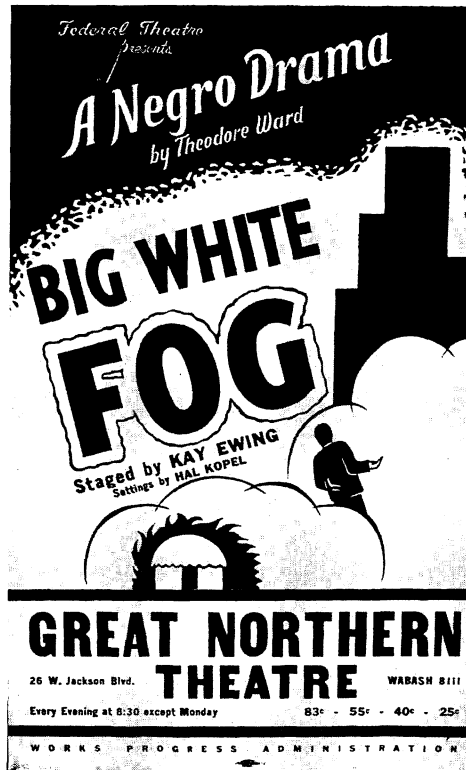


FIGURE THREE: Poster for the 1938 Chicago production of Theodore Ward's "Big White Fog."

### notes

I would like to thank Lorraine Brown at George Mason University and Esme Bhan at Howard University for helping me in the archives; the NEH, Graves Foundation, and Pomona College for supporting my research; and Abbe Blum, Robert Dawidoff, and W. D. King for sharing ideas and asking questions.

1. The major studies of the FTP have been centrally concerned with evaluating reasons for its failure. Various reasons are given from the culturally vague—the lack of a tradition of widespread theatre attendance—to the institutionally specific—the conflict of interest built into a relief program for the arts. Celebratory histories point out that the FTP's free or minimally priced tickets enabled millions of people to attend the theatre for the first time; playwrights, directors, scene designers who might never have been able to practice their craft without sustaining work were able not only to survive but to experiment and perfect their art.

My point, however, is that the frame of failure or celebration precludes examination of complex, often contradictory patterns of culture. In his study of the critical reception of the Harlem Renaissance, Houston A. Baker, Jr. argues that the question of failure “restrict[s] the field of possible responses. To ask ‘why’ the renaissance failed is to agree, at the very outset,

that the twenties did not have profoundly beneficial effects for areas of Afro-American discourse that we have only recently begun to explore in depth" ("Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance," *American Quarterly* 39 [Spring 1987] 91); see also Baker's full length study, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, (Chicago, 1987). The standard general histories of the Federal Theatre Project are: Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The Story of the Federal Theatre* (1940; rpt. New York, 1985); William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus, 1969); Jane De Hart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1967); and Lorraine Brown and John O'Connor, *Free, Adult, Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project* (Washington D.C., 1978).

2. Harry Minturn to Hallie Flanagan, (March 5, 1933, 3), F. T. Lane to Graham (January 22, 1938), Record Group 69, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (henceforth RG69, NA).

3. Plays were censored on just about every Project. The living newspaper play about the political situation in Ethiopia, entitled *Ethiopia*, was quickly perceived as too dangerous by officials in Washington. Flanagan was able to persuade a relief administrator to see the play and then rule on its suitability; the compromise, after a preview, was to allow the play to go on only if rulers or cabinet officials did not appear on stage; their speeches could only be quoted by narrators. See Mathews, *The Federal Theatre* for a discussion of *Ethiopia* and other instances of censorship.

4. Flanagan, National Office, General Correspondence (April 30-May 6, 1936), RG69, NA. See Jane De Hart Mathews, "Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy," *Journal of American History* 62 (September, 1975), 316-339 for a reading of the cultural elitism in the FTP.

5. Anyone who worked with blacks in the theatre or portrayed them on stage had to face the terms of a pervasive historical racism. The range of available parts had been rigidly defined; roles were narrowly, racially circumscribed. The minstrel stereotype, popular in the nineteenth century—childlike, innocent, slow, lazy, unrestrained, self-indulgent, irresponsible, vulgar—was still operative in the early twentieth century, in films, on stage, in popular culture. See Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York, 1971); Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1962); Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1974). From 1920 to 1930, black musicals appeared on Broadway every year; plays like *In Abraham's Bosom* and *The Emperor Jones* depicted the primitive and tragic black man and woman. During the twenties, when there were opportunities for black actors and playwrights to make a name for themselves and good money besides, few artists would risk losing the chance to perform in these plays rather than take a chance on an unknown black play. With such circumstances it is understandable that few plays by black people about modern black problems were written, and fewer still produced.

6. W. E. B. DuBois, "KRIGWA Players Little Negro Theatre," *Crisis*, 32 (July, 1926), 134.

7. Alain Locke, "The Negro and American Theatre" in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (essay published in 1927; rpt. New York, 1971), 268. Huggins writes in *Harlem Renaissance* that "[t]he Negro intellectuals were attempting to build a race and define a culture. If there was validity in the notion of distinctive racial cultural contribution, it must be in the special experience of the race itself. So the whole people and the whole Afro-American experience had to be searched and exploited for clues to heritage. . . . When the promoters of the New Negro looked back to find his origins, or when they tried to discuss racial culture, they were always thrown back upon Africa" (78-79).

8. There seems to be a further contradiction about this organic tradition as described by DuBois and Locke. Both critics wrote as if the black folk tradition were a tradition that artists could invoke while at the same time they seemed to describe themselves in the process of establishing a tradition that had not yet taken root. Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s championing of a black vernacular criticism is the modern descendent of the black intellectual essentialism of the 1920s and 1930s. See Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago, 1986); Gates, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York, 1987). For a critical response to these practitioners, see Cornel West, "Minority Discourse and the Pitfalls of Canon Formation," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* I (Fall, 1987), 193-201.

9. Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Writer* (Oxford, 1987), 166. On the split between black intellectuals and the masses, see Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York, 1967); John Brown Childs, "Afro-American Intellectuals and the People's Culture," *Theory and Society* 13 (1984), 69-90; and Abiodun Jeyifous, "Black Critics on Black Theatre in America," *Drama Review*, 18 (September, 1974): 34-45.

10. William Farnsworth to Alfred E. Smith, June 26, 1936; RG69, NA.

11. Flanagan, *Theatre Arts Monthly* 19 (November, 1935), 867. The FTP's yearly budget between 1935 and 1937 averaged 10 million dollars, less than 1% of the total spent on the entire WPA. At its height, it employed over 12,000 people and presented 830 major titles and countless other productions to thirty million people.

12. The emphasis on regionalism was felt in each of the Federal Arts Projects—writing, music, history and theatre. Examples can be found in the Federal Writers' Project guide-

books of individual states; the collection of former slave narratives; the Federal Art Projects' murals of local scenes painted across America; and recordings of folk music. See Erwin O. Christensen, *The Index of American Design* (New York, 1950); Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1982); Federal Writers' Project, *These Are Our Lives* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1939).

13. Everyone agrees that the FTP provided black theatre artists with a good opportunity to practice their craft, learn new skills and play roles that matched their talent. See Lorraine Brown, "A Story Yet to be Told: The Federal Theatre Research Project," *Black Scholar* 10 (July-August, 1979), 75. But developing playwrights was a good deal more difficult. In *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era: Beyond the Formal Horizons* (Amherst, Massachusetts, 1980), E. Quita Craig argues that black playwrights adapted to this situation by writing under a "dual communication system": "on the one hand the messages were interpreted by the white experience, on the other they were decoded by the black experience, and the translations often differed; sometimes they were totally opposite" (23). On this same subject see Clarence Muse, "The Dilemma of the Negro Actor" (Los Angeles, December 25, 1934, Beinecke Library, Yale University).

For histories of Afro-American theatre in the twentieth century, see Doris Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theater 1926-1952* (New York, 1969); James V. Hatch, *Black Image on the American Stage* (New York, 1970); Errol Hill, ed., *The Theater of Black Americans I: Roots and Rituals/The Image Makers and The Theater of Black Americans II: The Presenters/The Participants* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1980); Lofton Mitchell, *Black Drama: The Story of the American Negro in the Theatre* (New York, 1967).

14. Flanagan's production record printed in *Arena* lists 30 new productions of black drama, that is, plays specifically written for Negro units (or adapted, such as the *Swing Mikado* and *Macbeth*), and 25 revivals. I estimate approximately 20% of the playwrights were blacks; (Flanagan, *Arena*, 392-393, 420-436).

15. For instance, a living newspaper about Afro-American history written by Abram Hill and John Silvera was suppressed in New York. The two men had been encouraged at the outset, but FTP administrators must have felt that their final draft was too brutal a picture for the New York audience; see Craig, *Black Drama*, 62-70.

16. Flanagan, *Arena*, 134.

17. Richard Wright's experience in 1936 on the Negro unit previews some of the battles Theodore Ward would encounter two years later. Nobody seems to have liked the early work directed by an older, conservative white woman, Marie Merrill, but even Charles DeSheim, brought in as a younger, more liberal and experimental director, had problems with the unit. In his autobiography of his Chicago years, *American Hunger*, Wright describes his short tenure on the Project. It is a fascinating account of Wright's and DeSheim's attempt to "produce" a Paul Green play called *Hymn to the Rising Sun*, about chain-gang conditions in the South. According to Wright, the black actors refused to do the play, claiming that they wanted to perform drama "that will make the public love us." Within days, frustrated by what he believed to be the timidity of the actors, Wright transferred out of the unit. The actors in turn saw his championing of a play written by a white liberal, clearly meant for a liberal white and black audience, as a form of Uncle Tom-like behavior. See Richard Wright, *American Hunger*, (New York, 1944; rpt. 1977), 114.

18. From *Midwest Daily Record*, April 13, 1938, *Big White Fog*, Production Notebook; (Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collection at George Mason University, Virginia; henceforth GMV). See also Ward's clipping file in the New York Public Library, Lincoln Center for further biographical information. Wright brought together in the Southside Writers' Club about twenty people for weekly meetings to read their work. The group included Ward, Frank Marshall Davis, Robert Davis, Edward Bland and Russell Marshall. Michel Fabre claims they wanted to be seen as the heirs of the Harlem Renaissance, but they were certainly a more politically committed group than the loosely tied New York writers; (Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. Isabel Barzun [New York, 1973], 128). Although Wright was further to the left than most of the group, all were "as dedicated to the art of writing as Wright was himself. They were equally as strident against racism, exploitation, and oppression, and they sought to cultivate a literature that would counteract the stereotypes of blacks already prevalent"; (Addison Gayle, *Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son* [New York, 1980], 85). See also Margaret Walker Alexander's "Richard Wright" in *New Letters* 38 (December, 1971), 182-202 for another description of this group of young black writers.

19. Theodore Ward, *Big White Fog*, in *Black Theater, U.S.A. Forty-Five Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974*, ed. James V. Hatch (New York, 1974), 283. Subsequent quotations will be cited from this text.

20. Minturn to Flanagan (March 5, 1938), RG69, NA.

21. Kathy A. Perkins, "The Unknown Career of Shirley Graham," 25 *Freedomways* (1985), 10. I am indebted to this article for the facts of Graham's life. There is some uncertainty about what position Graham did hold in the FTP. Perkins claims that Kondolf offered her the directorship of the Chicago unit; however this is not supported by the records. Marie Merrill and Charles DeSheim headed the company, jointly, at least for a time. See Perkins, "The Unknown Career," 12.

22. Letter from Shirley Graham to Mrs. Harriett Gibbs Marshall, November 27, 1937; Washington Conservatory of Music Manuscript, Moorland-Spiuagarn Howard University Research Center.

23. Graham to Minturn (February 5, 1938), RG69, NA. Further quotations of Graham's about this episode are from this letter. I have altered a few obvious typographical errors.

24. Flanagan, *Arena*, 143.

25. *Big White Fog*, Production Notebook, 5, GMU.

26. S. B. Danley, Manager Illinois State Employment Service, to Graham (January 6, 1938), RG69, NA; A. C. MacNeal, Executive Secretary of NAACP, to Graham (January 22, 1938), RG69, NA.

27. Graham to E. Kendell Davis (January 24, 1938), RG69, NA.

28. Ernest B. Price to Minturn (February 2, 1938), RG69, NA.

29. See Perkins' description of Graham's *Tom-Tom* in "The Unknown Career of Shirley Graham," 9-10.

30. Graham to Minturn (February 5, 1938), RG69, NA.

31. F. T. Lane to Graham (January 22, 1938), RG69, NA.

32. The problem continues to torment progressive theatre companies of today. Mass audiences tend to reject the experimental in the political or aesthetic realms. Lindsay Patterson, writing in 1974, claims that "black audiences want realistic plays . . . why should they go through changes to go into a theatre. . . . Mass black audiences, like mass audiences anywhere, want especially to be entertained"; see "Black Theatre: The Search Goes On," in *The Theater of Black Americans II*, 148, 152. Harold Cruse argues that it is up to the black bourgeoisie to spur on black creative intellectuals: "Unless this class (the black bourgeoisie) is brought into the cultural situation and forced to carry out its responsibilities on a community, organizational and financial level, the cultural side of the black revolution will be retarded" (*The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* [New York, 1976], 111). It is fairly clear that the black middle class or, at least, the black leaders in church organizations and the NAACP in Chicago during the 1930s were, for the most part, unwilling to support what they considered a radical play.

33. Minturn to Flanagan (March 5, 1938), 3, 4, RG69, NA.

34. Ewing had directed two other productions in the legitimate theatre unit in 1937; *Big White Fog* was her directing debut for the Negro unit.

35. Theodore Ward, Oral Interview by Lorraine Brown (August 13, 1976), 6, GMU.

36. Ralf Coleman, in Boston, directed the Negro unit from start to finish, though here too there were disputes over the kinds of shows he wanted to direct.

37. Ward Interview, 7, GMU. Here is how Ward describes this series of events in this interview: "One local Negro woman and Hallie Flanagan put the play on. Because the Board of Censors came in and said, 'No' after the preview of opening night. And this Negro woman who was quietly very powerful, a Negro woman on the South Side, her reputation wasn't known by the community at large but it was known as far as the Republican party was concerned. She had access to the McCormicks and all those people and she was a very able woman. She could go down to any judge and get somebody out of jail. She called . . . [o]ne of the local commissioners [of the City] and said, 'This is nothing but a bunch of Negroes who are jealous of [my] boy—['] . . . The Mayor had ducked; he'd gone out of town because he knew it was hot stuff, you know. He'd gone. He didn't want to be bothered. And so, [Joe Geary, the Commissioner,] called . . . [t]he Board of Censors and told them [to permit the] play [to open.] Now the play was dead at 12:00 that day but by 2:00 [p.m., I] got a notice [to see a Mr. Costello, Chairman] of the Board of Censors . . . in Chicago."

38. The reader's report on *Big White Fog*, by Converse Tyler, criticized its wordiness (as did many reviewers) and suggested that it should be cut, but, with these reservations, recommended it as an "interesting social document" (Reader's Report, GMU). It is significant that there is no mention of the politically sensitive material—no reference to the "communist" solution, nor to the bleak depiction of the black family.

39. Paul T. Gilbert, "Race Problem Theme of *Big White Fog*," *Herald and Examiner* (April 8, 1938); *Big White Fog*, Production Notebook, 16, GMU.

40. Charles Collins, *The Chicago Tribune* (April 8, 1938); *Big White Fog*, Production Notebook, 14, GMU.

41. Flanagan, *Arena*, 143.

42. Gail Borden, *Chicago Daily Times*; *Big White Fog*, Production Notebook, 17, GMU.

43. Minturn to Flanagan (March 5, 1938), 3, RG69, NA.

44. Ward Interview, 8, GMU.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

47. Abramson, *Negro Playwrights*, 116. For reviews of the 1940 production, see clipping file, Theodore Ward, Theatre Collection, New York Public Library, Lincoln Center.

48. Langston Hughes, Intro., *Big White Fog*, in *Black Theater, U.S.A.*

49. See audience surveys of *Sweetland* in Harlem and *Macbeth* in Los Angeles, GMU; Ronald Ross, "The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939," in *The Theatre of Black Americans II*; and the papers of the Federal Writers' Project, NA, especially the material on *Drums and Shadows*, the book about the islands off Georgia, and the Beaufort, South Carolina guide.