

HOME FRONT AS WARFRONT: AFRICAN AMERICAN WORLD WAR I DRAMA

BY

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Abstract

This dissertation recovers little-known African American World War I plays that blur the boundary between the home front and warfront. I argue that with this focus, the plays wage their own war for African American citizenship rights, using language and performance to gain access to the “imagined” community of the nation. Yet plays from different time periods focus on diverse aspects of the Great War; these differences provide insight into how World War I was thought of and employed, and for what purposes, in African American communities during the interwar years. The project fills an important gap in African American drama, theatre, and war literature scholarship; no book-length analysis exists, yet scholarly conversations surrounding African Americans in the Great War are energetic. Despite scholars’ arguments that the war “gave birth” to the New Negro, the plays that dramatize the subject have drifted into obscurity. Thus, this project is overdue; the plays complete the historical picture of African American drama and provide a better understanding of the ways contemporary life in the United States is still haunted by World War I.

For my grandmother, Hope Brooker Anderson, who modeled the transformative power of education and inspired me to become a teacher.

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Introduction

Prologue: The “Official” Play About African Americans and World War I

There is no future for men and women, Black or white, until the world is safe for democracy. We have a present duty, which is to do all we can to win the war. We cannot remain a free people—we do not deserve to be free—unless in all things we stand by our government together with all free people who are fighting to make the world safe for democracy. For us, Black and white, it is freedom or slavery.¹

This address, spoken by a white dignitary while African American children marched on stage holding American and Allies’ flags, was the cornerstone of the United States Food Administration’s Fourth of July pageant for African Americans, “Why We Are at War,” a clear effort to gain and promote African American support for the Great War. On May 28, 1918, a year after the United States entered the conflict, the government agency distributed letters to major population centers of African Americans urging them to organize and put on this spectacle. The pageant included patriotic music, such as “The Star Spangled Banner,” “Over There,” and “Keep the Home Fires Burning,” lessons on food conservation, and grand speeches from government or city officials. Clearly, the United States government recognized the usefulness of the theatre in influencing American (African American or otherwise) attitudes about the war.

Yet, the particular rhetoric of the pageant is worth noting; it shows a very different emphasis than that of the dramas that African Americans wrote about the Great War. The trope

¹ From “Why We Are at War,” United States Food Administration, 1918. Reprinted in Hatch and Shine’s *Black Theatre U.S.A.* The editors note that Hatch discovered the materials in the papers of the U.S. Food Administration in the National Archives.

of freedom (contrasted with “slavery”) is employed purposefully to garner support for the Allied cause from the African American audience. The lack of focus on just what “freedom,” “slavery,” and “democracy” meant for African Americans living in a Jim Crow society, however, seemed to escape the organizers’ grasp. For example, the pageant outline provided by the Food Administration contains this instruction: “The point of the celebration [is] to reflect the serious conditions of the war and the celebration [is] to be not for pleasure, except for the children; the men and women are to be present that they may learn what they can do to help stop the destruction of their liberty, as well as the liberty of all free men—or to keep from being slaves” (qtd. in Hatch and Shine 94). While the allusion to American slavery (still very real in 1918, just fifty-three years after it was outlawed in the United States) might have been persuasive, it is also unintentionally ironic: “help stop destruction of their liberty” suggests that African Americans in 1918 had equal liberties to begin with, or that Jim Crow America was not simply a system of neo-slavery, an argument several of the later African American World War I plays make explicit.

This official stage version of what African Americans should think about the war, sponsored by the United States Government, contrasts greatly with the “unofficial” African American plays written about the conflict. Yet all of the plays share some of the same basic elements: the inclusion of patriotic music, the use of Fourth of July celebrations or other patriotic scenes as backdrops, and an emphasis on the tropes of freedom and slavery. The African American World War I plays, however, infuse these elements with at least some level of irony. In this way they move beyond the “official” story about African Americans and the Great War and become telling documents about African American attitudes and memories of the war. While they differ in terms of time period and location, all provide insight into how World War I was being thought of and employed, and for what purposes, in the African American community.

The Home Front as Warfront: African American World War I Drama

What does it mean to fight for democracy abroad when it is not fully realized at “home”? At the core of African American drama written about World War I is this question, prompted by Woodrow Wilson’s 1917 declaration that the world “be made safe for democracy” by America’s entry into the Great War. My dissertation recovers little-known African American World War I plays that focus on this blurring of the boundary between home front and warfront. I use the term “African American World War I plays” to indicate drama written by African Americans before the Second World War that deals in a substantial way with the Great War, whether that means setting the drama on a battlefield in France, depicting an African American family left to pick up the pieces after a soldier’s death, or presenting the later life of an African American veteran. The eight plays I explore are Alice Dunbar Nelson’s *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918), Mary P. Burrill’s *Aftermath* (1919), Joseph S. Cotter Jr.’s *On the Fields of France* (1920), Randolph Edmonds’s *Everyman’s Land* (1930), May Miller’s *Stragglers in the Dust* (1930), Langston Hughes’ “The Colored Soldier” (1931), Conrad Seiler’s *Sweet Land* (1937), and Abram Hill and Frank Silvera’s *Liberty Deferred* (1938).² Each treatment of the Great War is different, reflecting the time period as well as the playwright’s individual perspective and style. Thus, World War I plays were written during (and are set in) many time periods, from the immediate aftermath of the war to the Harlem Renaissance and the Depression era. Additionally, two are unpublished, and some were produced while others were either lost (*Stragglers in the Dust*), meant to be read (*Everyman’s Land*), or suppressed (*Liberty Deferred*). It is interesting to note, then, that a core

² Additional African American World War I plays that I did not have room to address in my project include a musical by Billy King, *Over the Top* (1919); a melodrama by Doris Price, *Bright Medallion* (1932); a one-act by soldier Gough D. McDaniels, *A Long, Long Trail* (date unknown); and Randolph Edmonds’s *The Merchant of Dixie* (1923) (destroyed in a flood).

concern in all of the plays, ranging from 1918-1938, is the presentation of a dual war motif: all of the plays argue that the home front of America is also a (racial, economic, gendered, etc.) war zone. With this emphasis, the plays make an argument for full citizenship rights, using language and performance to gain access to the “imagined” community of the nation. Yet they make this argument with different inflections, based on their unique contexts. The early plays focus on the war's direct impact on African Americans: whether they should serve, what the consequences of that service will be, and how that service can benefit the fight for full African American citizenship. The 1920s plays, in contrast, move to issues of the representation of African American soldiers in popular culture and military history. They attempt to rewrite Great War history and revise minstrel images of African American soldiers as cowardly and deficient. 1930s plays, from the early years of the Great Depression, use World War I as a catalyst for discussions of contemporary issues, such as the surge in lynchings in 1930 and rising fascism with the stirrings of a Second World War. Later Great Depression plays, written for the Federal Theatre Project, are more explicitly political and demand changes be made in American society through means such as labor unions and radical political movements while also challenging the stereotypes popularized by the new media of radio and film.

This project fills an important gap in African American drama and war literature scholarship; no book-length analysis of African American World War I drama exists. Major texts of African American drama and performance essentially overlook World War I.³ Others devote no more than a few pages to the war.⁴ This is surprising in part because there is a plethora of

³ See Bean's *A Sourcebook of African-American Performance*, Elam and Krasner's *African American Performance and Theater History*, Hay's *African American Theatre*, Sanders's *The Development of Black Theater in America*, and Turner's *Black Drama in America*.

⁴ See Hamalian and Hatch's *The Roots of African American Drama* and *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance 1920-1940*, Hatch and Shine's *Black Theatre U.S.A*, Hill and Hatch's *A History of*

historical research about African American participation in the Great War.⁵ The omission is even more striking because of the attention World War I receives in scholarship about the Harlem Renaissance (despite the scholars' intense disagreements on other matters). David Levering Lewis begins his book *When Harlem Was in Vogue* with a chapter devoted to the Great War. Nathan Huggins argues that World War I was the "collective experience" that forged the "New Negro" (6). George Hutchinson similarly asserts that the war "gave birth" to the Harlem Renaissance ("Aftermath" 199).

Their focus on the Harlem Renaissance is valuable: the period, spanning from (arguably) 1918-1940,⁶ saw an unprecedented outpouring of African American cultural products. It marked the "greatest single shift in consciousness of black life and thought prior to the Civil Rights Movement" (Krasner "A Beautiful" 293), and "ensured a place for African Americans in world culture" (Hatch "A History" 254). Just as important, a focus on the period illuminates the way African American artists and writers were participants in modernism, although they are often excluded from such consideration. In his seminal text *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*

African American Theatre, Dicker/sun's *African American Theater: A Cultural Companion*, Krasner's *A Beautiful Pageant*, Perkins's *Black Female Playwrights*, Peterson's *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers*, Allen's *Peculiar Passages*, Hill's *The Theater of Black Americans*, Brown-Guillory's *Their Place on the Stage*. An exception is Doris E.

Abramson's 1967 *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre 1925-1959*, which opens the chapter on African American drama of the 1920s with a discussion of World War I.

⁵ See James, pg. 7, as well as Barbeau, Brown, Ellis, S. Harris, Henri, Hunton, and Kornweibl.

⁶ Periodization of the Harlem Renaissance is particularly contested. Arna Bontemps set the movement from 1921-1931 (ending with the Great Depression); Nathan Huggins similarly dates it from 1918-1932; David Levering Lewis dates it as 1917-1935; and Hatch and Hamalian, Patton and Honey, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay see the movement extending through the 1930s, with the dates set at roughly 1919-1940. In their introduction to *Double Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, Patton and Honey note that Cheryl Wall and Gloria Hull have both stated that "narrower time and geographical parameters for the Harlem Renaissance work against women, most of whom published in a scattered way across a continuum of time and from regions outside of Harlem" (xxvi). Because of these recent, more inclusive, ideas about the movement I see all of the African American World War I plays (1918-1938) as falling under the rubric of the Harlem Renaissance.

(1987), Houston A. Baker, Jr. argues that earlier studies of the Harlem Renaissance (such as Huggins's and Lewis's) focus on the movement as a "failure" because it did not "produce... 'modern' art in the manner, presumably, of British, Anglo-American, and Irish creative endeavors" (xiii). Baker posits that African American literature of the Harlem Renaissance used the strategies of "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery" to create a distinctly black modernism in opposition to Anglo-modernism (9).⁷ More recent explorations of modernisms in the Harlem Renaissance, such as George Hutchinson's *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995) and Geoffrey Jacques's *A Change in the Weather: Modernist Imagination, African American Imaginary* (2009), argue that African American modernisms are central to, not separate from, Anglo-modernisms. Hutchinson argues, "the most important African American literary modernists were those who were *both* most prone to interracial intimacy (despite its frequent cost) and most secure in their convictions about the cultural wealth of black America" (25). Similarly, Jacques asks, "What might happen if we elaborate a genealogy of modernism in Anglo-American literature that puts African American culture, and African American artists, at its center?" (4). He answers that African American culture and artists of the Harlem Renaissance were "catalysts of, and not just influences upon, modernism" (5). The title "Harlem

⁷ Baker gives succinct metaphors for the differences between the terms: "Adopting a shorthand, we might say in fact that the difference between the mastery of form and the deformation of mastery is that between a praying mantis, or rabbit (did you ever attempt to follow the movements of an autumn hare through sedge-brown, October woods?), and a gorilla. The mastery of form conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee. The deformation of mastery, by contrast, is Morris Day singing 'Jungle Love,' advertising, with certainty, his unabashed *badness*—which is not always conjoined with violence. *Deformation* is a go(ue)rilla action in the face of acknowledged adversaries" (50). In his analysis, Booker T. Washington, Charles Chesnutt, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen provide examples of mastery of form while W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Alain Locke serve as examples of deformation of mastery (although Baker is careful to note that all of the men used both strategies at points in their writings).

Renaissance,” however, has its limits. James Hatch notes that the movement was called the “New Negro, the Negro Renaissance, the Negro Awakening, and the Jazz Age,” yet,

None of the titles served, for the Negro was not ‘new,’ although opportunity was. They had not ‘awakened,’ but white America had awakened to them. The so-called Harlem Renaissance was not Harlem’s, but all urban centers where Blacks had sought freedom, and finally, the Renaissance, a symbol of renewal, was a lie since most of them began their ‘freedom’ with little, except their culture, which had been nurtured in the segregated South. (Hatch “A History” 215)

I use the term “Harlem Renaissance” in this project because, despite its limitations, it is still the dominant term in the scholarship with which I seek to be in conversation.

While scholars of the Harlem Renaissance emphasize the war’s influence on African American literature, until recently little has been done to analyze the literature through the lens of World War I. That has changed with monographs such as Jennifer C. James’s *A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II* (2007) and Mark Whalan’s *The Great War and the Culture of the New Negro* (2008), both invaluable to the student of twentieth-century African American war literature.⁸ While these texts indicate a growing interest in African American literature and the Great War, neither focuses on drama; James includes no plays in her study and Whalan concentrates on fiction and poetry. Even though James and Whalan do not focus on the body of work I’m interested in, they do provide a useful framework for analyzing the African American World War I plays and show that scholarly conversations surrounding African Americans in the Great War are energetic.

⁸ Articles on the subject have also recently been published. They include David A. Davis’s 2008 “Not Only War is Hell: World War I and African American Lynching Narratives” and George Hutchinson’s 2004 “*Aftermath: African American Literary Responses to the Great War.*”

Unfortunately, the plays that deal with this subject have drifted into obscurity. Yet the plays once stirred readers and changed audiences. Thus, my dissertation is vital to the study of African American literature; the plays complete the historical picture of African American drama and provide a better understanding of the ways contemporary life in the United States is still haunted by World War I. As we near the 100 year anniversary of America's entry into the Great War, at a time when the nation is embroiled in two foreign conflicts as well as a more global "War on Terror," a focus on this "haunting" seems particularly timely; the ongoing struggles for racial, economic, and gender equality throw into high relief the plays' question of whether true "Democracy" has been achieved for the nation's citizens.

Methodological Framework

In an effort to understand these plays from a variety of perspectives I draw from a wide range of theoretical models, including scholarship on African American war literature, the study of United States culture through the lens of performance, and scholarship on national cultures and communities. From studies of African American war literature, I glean the thread that holds my project together: the notion of the home front of America being a warfront for African Americans.⁹ In *A Freedom Bought With Blood*, James discusses this theme of the United States

⁹ During World War I the term "home front" was popularized as a tool of propaganda to persuade non-combatants, specifically women, to join in the war effort. Some American homemakers were asked to sign a pledge card (a sort of private draft) to join an army of "kitchen soldiers": "During the early months of the war, women's organizations canvassed their members, dutifully filling note cards with lists of skills that might be useful to the war effort" (Capozzola 91). President Woodrow Wilson also promoted this notion of an army of homemakers. In his 1917 proclamation titled "Do Your Bit for America," he stated, "the men and the women who devote their thought and energy to these things will be serving the country and conducting the fight for peace and freedom just as truly and just as effectively as the men on the battlefield or in the trenches...and every housewife who practices strict economy puts herself in the ranks of those who serve the nation" (qtd. in Ciment 1129-1131). This notion of women becoming home

as a “war within a war” and argues that it is the fundamental problematic for understanding African American literature about war. She notes that many African American authors present two war narratives in their texts: “the narrative of national warfare and the narrative of racial strife” (James 9). Marilyn Elkins, writing about African American female war dramatists, concurs, and argues that the women’s plays are “double-edged”: “African American women counterpoint the nation’s declared international conflicts with its undeclared racial war at home: the war that black women writing in a predominantly white racist culture know intimately” (“Sicker Than” 55). In this context, the act of writing about the home front as a warfront becomes a form of counter-attack; James argues that the war writers use the “pen as a weapon” and “wield it as power” (9). Scholars’ notions of the dual war narrative apply well to African American World War I drama, and they provide the starting place for my own analysis.

Another useful framework I take from the field of African American war literature is the importance of African American bodies in the texts. Whalan notes that the Great War had a striking impact on how the black male body was regarded: “The intense corporeality of war, in bringing black male bodies into new kinds of visibility, therefore seemed to open up possibilities for transforming how race was constituted and engendered in the field of vision” (165). Similarly, James argues that African American war literature presents the military as a site for black males to display masculinity. She writes that traditionally the military was thought of as a “space where boys were made men and men made more manly—where... blacks (or beasts, in other words) could be made men” (16). She cites the abundance of “before” and “after” photographs of African American soldiers, where groups of black men are shown “transformed”

front warriors is underscored by the 1917 formation of the Women’s Land Army, the “Soldiers of the Soil” who volunteered to do the farm labor of the men drafted into military service (Weiss x).

into uniformed U.S. soldiers, as evidence of this attitude. Despite this idea, however, James argues that the photographs “might suggest that the reason many African American men joined the army was not necessarily to *be* transformed (as many already considered themselves men) or ‘disciplined’ (for many did not accept the nationalist ideologies that accompanied service), but rather to *display* a body that the nation would accept as ‘corrected’” (16). James uses “corrected” here in reference to Foucault’s notion of the military as a site of (bodily) rehabilitation (15).¹⁰ Literature fits into this discussion because of its ability to “display” bodies:

The perfected body within African American literature, particularly idealized representations of the black male soldier-citizen, became part of a larger set of cultural images designed to refute characterizations of deficiency and/or offer evidence of bodily rehabilitation, both tasks fueled by the necessity of imagining a black body poised to take up its position within the national body politic. (James 16)

It is important to note that James links these displays of masculinity with a quest for full inclusion in the nation. Furthering James’s argument on this point, I would add that drama, with performance’s emphasis on physicality and the body, is an ideal place to analyze the “perfected body” of the idealized black male and the arguments the plays are making about African Americans’ citizenship rights.¹¹

¹⁰ James refers to Foucault’s argument in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* that by the 1700s the French Army imagined the body as a pliable form and the military as a “machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it” (138).

¹¹ For example, in her 1905 essay “Colored Men and Women on the Stage,” Aida Overton Walker speaks to the importance of perfected African American bodies on the stage. She writes, “In this age we are all fighting the one problem—that is the color problem! I venture to think and dare to state that our profession does more toward the alleviation of color prejudice than any other profession among colored people...we come into contact with more white people in a week than other professional colored people meet in a year” (72). She goes on to note the importance

Because scholars of African American war literature emphasize mainstream American nationalism, Benedict Anderson's notion of the nation as a "community imagined through language" (146) has proved instructive. He argues that the nation is imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6). He goes on to say that it is imagined as a "community" "because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship." It is this sense of community that makes millions of people willing to die for their country (Anderson 7). These ideas help illuminate one of the basic questions raised in African American World War I plays: why should one fight for democracy abroad when one has none at home? Anderson also likens the nation to national anthems, saying that "such choruses are joinable in time...If nationalness has about it an aura of fatality, it is nonetheless a fatality embedded in *history*...from the start the nation was conceived in language, not in blood, and...one could be 'invited into' the imagined community" (145). This statement has a direct correlation to African American World War I drama; the plays are performing language for their audiences to gain access to the "imagined community" of the nation. It is important to note that Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark*, specifies that America, as a "community imagined through language," is specifically imagined as white (39). The African American World War I plays imagine a new kind of community—one where African Americans have full citizenship rights.

The next theoretical model I use selectively is Joseph Roach's concept of circum-Atlantic performance, which "takes up the three-sided relationship of memory, performance, and

of African American bodies on stage as a way to show "we are as capable as white people" and to help African Americans "learn to appreciate the noble and the beautiful within us" (73).

substitution” (Roach 2). While my study focuses on the United States, not the circum-Atlantic, I borrow from Roach three terms that are particularly helpful in illuminating the earlier plays that emphasize bodies and memories of the war:¹² kinesthetic imagination, vortices of behavior, and displaced transmission. Inspired by dance historians’ theories of bodies as conveyors of memory, Roach defines kinesthetic imagination as “a way of thinking through movements—at once remembered and reinvented—the otherwise unthinkable, just as dance is often said to be a way of expressing the unspeakable” (26-27). Applied to African American World War I drama, kinesthetic imagination highlights the ways characters funnel cultural memories through their behaviors, specifically the “unthinkable” or “unspeakable” memories of slavery.¹³ Roach’s notion of vortices of behavior is just as useful; he writes that “the vortex is a kind of spatially induced carnival, a center of cultural self-invention through the restoration of behavior” (28). Vortices of behavior are places that are haunted, and that have the power to make ghosts felt. The early plays are set in vortices of behavior; those that take place in the United States display the home front as a war zone, a space haunted by the violence of slavery. Conversely, the plays set in France show No Man’s Land as a place haunted by the racist atrocities of the United States. Roach’s third helpful term is displaced transmission, which he describes as the ways in which “popular behaviors are resituated in new locales. Much more happens through transmission by surrogacy than the reproduction of tradition. New traditions may also be invented and others overturned” (28-29). Roach argues that when behaviors are transplanted to new places they come to mean something new because of the impossibility of exact replication.

¹² The late Great Depression plays, discussed in Chapter 4, are less concerned with the presentation of embodiment and are more focused on class and economic issues. Thus, I use Roach’s framework less in my discussion of those later plays.

¹³ This vocabulary is reminiscent of Toni Morrison’s 1989 article, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” in which Morrison discusses the canonization of American literature.

By re-framing these terms in an American rather than a circum-Atlantic context, I acknowledge that I am taking Roach's attempt to revise constricting notions of nation and culture only to put them back into a national framework. Yet, my project also strives to take a revisionist view of the plays' presentations of nation in the interwar years. By using Roach's terms, I am able to delve into the ways the early African American World War I plays connect the issues of memory and the body to question just what being "American" meant for African Americans from 1918-1938.

For the later plays, written at various times during the Great Depression, I employ a focus on different strains of leftism to analyze the ways these writers shifted to issues of class struggle in their texts. As William J. Maxwell argues, "The history of African-American letters cannot be unraveled from the history of American Communism without damage to both" (2). For example, Maxwell states that almost all Harlem Renaissance writers were affiliated with Communism at some time in the 1920s or 1930s.¹⁴ To illustrate his point, he lists Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Louise Thompson, Sterling Brown, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ralph Ellison, Margaret Walker, Robert Hayden, Melvin Tolson, Owen Dodson, and Theodore Ward: a small who's who of African American literature in the mid-twentieth century (Maxwell 2). The relationship between African American literary culture and the Left, however, is complex; until recently, scholars generally accepted the idea that association with Communism had damaged African American literature, and that there was no reciprocal influence between the "New Negro" and the "Old Left," to use Maxwell's phrase. Maxwell is careful to emphasize that these writers' relationships to Communism weren't one sided: "What is inadequate about the verdict [of Communism's "stultifying" influence on black

¹⁴ He notes two major exceptions: Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston.

writing], however, is the supposition that the meeting of black and white Reds remade only the black” (5). Instead, he argues that “recognizing black volition and interracial education on the Old Left is crucial to understanding weighty developments in the history of U.S. racial and radical cultures, from the stumbles and small victories of American anticapitalism, to the mapping of African American writing onto modernity, to the intimate contact between black and white American modernisms” (1). This sort of perspective on the reciprocal nature of African American writers’ engagement with the Left furthers my analysis of the later plays and is especially helpful when, for example, *Sweet Land* touts a fairly standard Communist Party plot but incorporates Christian imagery, combining two typically disparate ideologies and making something new. It also helps illuminate the final chapter, where I analyze plays written by both African American and white playwrights, and it becomes a final moment to consider the interplay between “black and white American modernisms.”

Debates Concerning Nation and Citizen

In addition to these diverse theoretical models, I develop my analysis of the African American World War I plays with a focus on the constellation of debates surrounding African Americans’ “Americanness” in the interwar years. George Hutchinson, in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, argues that Harlem Renaissance writers “were less concerned with proving their humanity than with demonstrating their Americanness, in the process challenging their white kinfolk to remake themselves and their concepts of America” (49). Thus, American national identity was “the dominant *problematic* structuring the literary field” during the period (Hutchinson 13).

Yet, pinpointing African Americans' national identities from 1918-1938 is a complex exercise. Key figures from all sides of the political spectrum asked: how "American" were African Americans? One element of the conversation can be seen in Marcus Garvey's black nationalism, an "unadulterated Wilsonian or ethnic nationalist vision" that urged people of the African Diaspora to return "back" to Mother Africa to found a black republic (Dawahare 6).¹⁵ Another facet of the debate came from ethnic dualists such as W.E.B. Du Bois who argued that African Americans had a dual identity, at once American¹⁶ but also uniquely African. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes,

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging, he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed in his face. (45-46)

Du Bois conceives of African Americans as politically engaged citizens, ones with "double selves" who struggle for the "Opportunit[ies]" promised to all Americans. Related to this ethnic

¹⁵ President Wilson, especially through his "Fourteen Points" speech given to Congress in 1918, proposed a nationalism based on an "ethnic-linguistic criterion: people of the same race and who spoke the same language constituted (in theory) a nation and had the right to self-determination" (Dawahare 4). Wilson's theory had a large impact in the formation of nation states after the break up of the Romanov, Hapsburg, and Ottoman empires after the Great War.

¹⁶ In "Africa, Colonialism, Zionism," Du Bois writes, "Let us realize that we are Americans, that we were brought here with the earliest settlers... In brief, there is nothing so indigenous, so completely 'made in America' as we" (146).

dualism is Alain Locke's vision of cultural pluralism, where small groups within a society retain unique cultural identities that are accepted and seen as necessary to the wider culture: "to Locke, different cultures should form complementary elements of a universal whole" (Hutchinson 83). According to Hutchinson, Locke "developed his theory that African American culture would not only build upon its unique values, but as the most 'mixed' of American cultures was best endowed to advance American aesthetics and thus to play the dominant role in the Americanization of culture in the United States" (92). Cultural pluralism, for Locke, was "the true mode of American cultural nationalism, whereas Anglo-conformity ([his] earlier orientation) was fundamentally 'un-American'" (Hutchinson 86). Locke saw the chief aims of African American citizens as being "mediators and cross-cultural 'interpreters'" through the production and appreciation of art. For Locke, "proving one's humanity was not the chief issue; achieving dialogue and community was, for this was the means of realizing liberty and democracy" (Hutchinson 42). In contrast to these three nationalist-centered modes of thought, another facet of the debate about African Americans' "Americanness" came from the far left. The Socialist and Communist parties, while promoting divergent agendas and practices throughout the interwar years, both pushed for an *internationalist* focus for African Americans (Dawahare 98). One can see the issue of nationality being dealt with differently in the eight World War I plays. For example, Alice Dunbar-Nelson's 1918 *Mine Eyes Have Seen* promotes a Du Boisian ethnic dualism, presenting African Americans as the *most* American of the nation's citizens. In contrast, Conrad Seiler's 1937 *Sweet Land* presents an internationalist framework, with its promotion of Communist Party-backed interracial unions. Thus, in the interwar years one sees a progression in the plays from a focus on "Americanness" to a sense of international class-consciousness, a

progression that followed the larger movement in American culture from wartime hyper-nationalism to Depression-era disillusionment with capitalism.

Tied to these differing versions of African Americans' relationships to the nation are the multiple depictions of America as a treacherous "home" for African Americans. The dual war motif James outlines in *A Freedom Bought With Blood* makes sense in the context of American history and the writing of major thinkers of the day. For instance, W.E.B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes give moving descriptions of the terror present at "home" in America at the beginning of the twentieth century. Looking back from 1962, Hughes notes:

The conditions of life for Negroes after the brief period of promise during Reconstruction were in many ways almost as unbearable as under slavery. The white-robed Ku Klux Klan spread violence up and down the highways of the South. Peonage reduced Negro workers to near-bondage again, mobs drove Negro voters from the polls, and the lynch rope kept Negro men from being men. ("Fight for Freedom" 36)

Particularly significant is Hughes's emphasis on the multifaceted nature of the war at home; he describes a racial, economic, political, and gender war. Similarly, in his 1920 collection of essays *Darkwater* Du Bois depicts America as a warfront, but this time in direct relation to World War I:

Conceive this nation [U.S.], of all human peoples, engaged in a crusade to make the 'World Safe for Democracy!' Can you imagine the U.S. protesting against Turkish atrocities in Armenia, while the Turks are silent about mobs in Chicago and St. Louis; what is Louvain compared with Memphis, Waco, Washington, Dyersburg, and Estill Springs? In short, what is the black man but America's

Belgium, and how could America condemn in Germany that which she commits, just as brutally, within her own borders? (34)

By explicitly comparing Germany's treatment of Belgium, the site of (reported) German atrocities such as "mass rape..., the mutilation of children, the use of slave labor, and the wanton destruction and desecration of private property" (Whalan 27), to the treatment of African Americans in the United States, Du Bois points out the United States' hypocrisy and creates a vivid metaphor for the reality of America as a warzone for African Americans.¹⁷ It is interesting to note that Du Bois uses the word "atrocities," or war crimes, to parallel the situation in America: clearly, lynching, segregation, and disenfranchisement were *not* federal crimes in the United States from 1918-1938, despite attempts at passing legislation from organizations as diverse as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the American Communist Party (CP) (Greenberg 70-79). In this way, Du Bois characterizes the home front of America as a racial warzone with seemingly no rules of engagement; the nation leading the charge for "Democracy," ironically, is filled with "atrocities."

Despite the paradoxes implicit in African Americans' relationships to America as a safe "home," several of the plays demonstrate African Americans' "Americanness" by depicting blacks in military service. The war, however, was not always a positive experience for African American males. According to Emmett J. Scott, a protégé of Booker T. Washington and the special advisor of African American affairs to the Secretary of War during World War I, "Four hundred thousand Negro soldiers were drafted or enlisted and 200,000 served in France under white officers and 1,200 officers of color" (213). Yet racism permeated all aspects of military

¹⁷ While this notion of the home front of America being a warzone for African Americans was widespread from 1900-1940, it certainly was not a new sentiment. James traces the theme back to literature covering the Revolutionary War and the beginning of the nation (3).

life, including the draft, where there were instances of draft boards denying exemptions to blacks while they gave out exemptions liberally to whites (Barbeau 35). It also affected the training camps, where African American troops were forced to live in segregated facilities with substandard living conditions: “Shelter for black troops often consisted of tents without flooring or boxing usually provided for houses under canvas, and sometimes without stoves in winter weather...the black area of camp might be situated on the edge of a swamp, or it might have no sewers” (Barbeau 50). These conditions were not typical of the white training camps.

The discrimination followed the African American soldiers to Europe, manifesting itself in the military’s policies regarding the black soldiers. The majority (eighty percent) of African American soldiers in World War I were laborers, working for the “Services of Supply,” doing the most labor-intensive work such as cleaning the camps and digging ditches (Henri 47). In fact, few black soldiers received basic training while all white soldiers received this important military instruction (Barbeau 91). The American military even went so far as to try to influence the French people’s interactions with the African American troops, warning the French not to fraternize with black troops (Johnson 17). The military purposefully spread propaganda against its own soldiers, trying to transplant American stereotypes like the myth of the black rapist into French minds.

Despite these experiences, many African American soldiers returned to the United States with honors and a renewed sense of militancy. For example, Henri notes: “More than one hundred black men and officers won the Croix de Guerre and other French decorations, and about ten won the highly prized United States Distinguished Service Cross. Countless other black soldiers won praise and promotions for their courage and heroism” (99). These tributes to the valor of African American men were a source of pride for not only veterans but also the

whole African American community. Additionally, many black soldiers returned from the war with a new vision of what life could be like, while in Europe, “black men from the remotest tenant farms of the South mingled with unprejudiced people” (Gloster 102). After getting a taste of this equality, the soldiers strengthened their resolve to change conditions for African Americans in the United States.

The African American community, however, debated its participation in the Great War. Even before the United States involved itself in the conflict, Du Bois wrote in favor of the war, and in 1918 he published his famous “Close Ranks” editorial that urged African Americans to serve. James Weldon Johnson echoed Du Bois’s sentiments in his 1918 editorial “Why Should a Negro Fight?”:

America is the American Negro’s country. He has been here three hundred years; that is, about two hundred years longer than most of the white people. He is a citizen of this country, declared so by the Constitution. Many of the rights and privileges of citizenship are still denied him, but the plain course before him is to continue to perform all of the duties of citizenship while he continually stresses his demands for all of the rights and privileges. (33)

By 1919, however, it was clear that the war had not been the opportunity Du Bois, Johnson, and other African Americans had envisioned (James 182). In that year Du Bois penned the editorial “Returning Soldiers” and urged African Americans to demand equal rights: “We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting.” Du Bois’s wording highlights the idea that the home front constituted a war, one that needed “fighting” immediately. This attitude reflects the many injustices African Americans faced in military service as well as signaling the fact that America, even after the “war for democracy” had been won, was still a war zone. Ultimately, the African

American World War I plays can be read as reacting to these fluctuating opinions about the Great War.

There were also debates about the role African American drama should play in ushering in a new society, specifically debates centering around what type of drama African American playwrights should create. The majority of images of African Americans on the U.S. stage during the early twentieth century were minstrel characters, and black playwrights felt the need to challenge those stereotypes, although they did so in different ways. Chief players in this debate were Du Bois and Locke.¹⁸ Briefly, Du Bois favored theatre that educated as it entertained, drama that was “designed primarily to convince whites of the Negro’s humanity” (Miller 83). In his 1926 “Criteria of Negro Art,” Du Bois stated:

All Art is propaganda and ever must be despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent. (296)

He encouraged propoganda plays that emphasized the “talented tenth,” including the use of “literate and thought-provoking language” (Hay 5). In contrast, Locke supported folk plays that created an aesthetic out of folk resources that aimed to “reveal...to black audiences the Negro’s ‘rich, emotional life’” (Miller 83). In his 1927 introduction to *Plays of Negro Life*, Locke criticized the “blight of propoganda,” stating: “It is not the primary function of drama to reform,

¹⁸ Henry Miller, in his 2003 dissertation “Art or Propaganda: A Historical and Critical Analysis of African American Approaches to Dramatic Theory, 1900-1965,” gives an excellent background of the twentieth century art vs. propoganda debate, including its foundation in the differences in dramatic theory between Will Marion Cook and Bob Cole, prominent African American theatre artists at the turn of the century (66-67).

but to refine and entertain” (2). Rather than Du Bois’s model middle class plots, characters, and language, Locke promoted “plots that were full of these people’s ‘lusty’ lives, myths, legends, and histories, ...[and] characters who were off the streets, who came out of joints and dives...[who spoke in] the language of ordinary folk” (Hay 5). It is important to remember, however, that both men believed in the need to develop a truly African American (realist) drama and in the fact that such a drama, whether propaganda or folk, was specifically American and always political. Hutchinson writes that Locke’s emphasis on art being created free of the dictates of propaganda “carries a subtle social and political charge that has escaped many critics of the Harlem Renaissance, beginning with Du Bois. Aesthetic judgment becomes itself a form of social participation, essential to the building of community and the interactive orientation of diverse individuals and social groups to a common world” (48-49). Of course, “aesthetic judgment” is not developed in a vacuum; in the “war zone” of American culture from 1918-1938, deeming the commonplace from African American lives worthy of theatre was a political act. Thus, wherever the World War I plays fall on the spectrum between propaganda and aesthetics, they should always be viewed with politics (specifically the demand for equal rights) in mind.

Also critical is an understanding of the readers and audiences for whom the playwrights were writing. Most playwrights published in the major African American journals of the time, such as *Crisis* or *Opportunity*. Others published in radical leftist magazines that had a predominantly white audience (Mary P. Burrill and the *Liberator*, for example). The journals had a wide readership and entered the most intimate spaces of African American life; Carol Dawn Allen notes that “beauty and barber shops, doctor’s offices, homes, schools, and social centers all subscribed to the new race-proud journals.... Thus, a play written by a black woman could travel

through neighborhood channels without ever reaching the stage, confounding our estimation that the theater is primarily a public forum and that the printed text is a private one” (92). While journals were an important medium for the dissemination of African American drama, there were (limited) production opportunities for the African American World War I plays. From 1918-1938, American commercial theatre (Broadway and the commercial traveling circuits) had little interest in anything other than musical comedy that presented African Americans as “happy-go-lucky, overly sensual bodies” (Gates “A Tragedy” 17).¹⁹ Thus, if African American propaganda or folk plays were produced, they were typically performed at “black high schools and colleges, church and library basements, the spaces commandeered by nomadic black theatre companies and those provided by black lodges, sororities, fraternities, and service organizations” (Allen 86). The plays’ use of unusual forms, one-acts, and dramatic monologues, with minimal, transportable sets and small casts, reflects the economic, racial, and gender barriers African American playwrights who wrote during the twenty year span from 1918-1938 faced. These issues also help explain why most of the African American World War I plays need to be recovered, a problem this project hopes to help correct.

Chapter Summaries

In the first two chapters, I contrast early African American female and male responses to the Great War. Chapter One analyzes Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918) and Mary P. Burrill’s *Aftermath* (1919). Each play, set on the home front, asks: How “American” are African Americans, and why should they fight for freedom abroad? Ultimately, both call for

¹⁹ Of course, this presentation by the musicals comprises its own sort of propaganda about race in America: the “musicals helped assist in the creation of black ‘primitivism,’ with fast-hoofing, show-girl attractions, and new rhythms establishing the myth of ‘black instinctualism’” (Krasner “Beautiful” 139).

equal citizenship rights as they “imagine” African American inclusion in the nation. Chapter Two focuses on the only World War I plays set in a war zone: Joseph Cotter, Jr.’s *On the Fields of France* (1920) and Randolph Edmonds’s *Everyman’s Land* (1930). Both plays present a seemingly idealistic union between white and black soldiers in the liminal space of no-man’s land. Interestingly, however, they still present the dual war motif, indicating that, while the soldiers find resolution on the battlefield, the war at home is still raging.

Chapter Three focuses on the haunting effects of World War I on the new battleground of the early Great Depression. Both May Miller’s *Stragglers in the Dust* (1930) and Langston Hughes’s dramatic recitation “The Colored Soldier” (1931) present the ghosts of African American soldiers killed in the Great War. Symbolically, these “hauntings” reveal more than personal memories of the war. Instead, the plays’ use of genteel forms (unusual in the context of 1930s theatre) attempts to connect individual African Americans’ experiences during World War I with memories of slavery and the new turmoil of the Great Depression. By doing so, the plays argue that, just as America is haunted by the ghostly black soldiers, so too should it recognize the racist practices that haunt the government’s policies on the economic crisis.

The final chapter takes up two plays that go beyond the genteel structure of the drama of the early Depression and move to explicit political statements: Conrad Seiler’s *Sweet Land* (1937) and Abram Hill and John Silvera’s *Liberty Deferred* (1938). Written for the Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939), both plays advocate a *new* war on the American home front: a class struggle that would necessitate black and white workers banding together to fight injustice on all issues. With this focus, the plays open up the discussion of African Americans in World War I to issues of economic privilege and the Second World War looming on the horizon. While the plays are similar in this respect, they do have a major difference: while Seiler has long been considered

an African American playwright, I have (with the help of James Hatch) proven that he was actually a white German American who wrote several plays about African Americans. This discovery provides an excellent final moment to analyze what, exactly, constitutes African American drama, and how the term, like the depiction of World War I in these plays, has changed with the decades. Does “Negro drama” simply reveal plots centered on African American characters’ lives? The whole spectrum of African American World War I plays provides a possible answer: all of the plays written by African American playwrights employ what Henry Louis Gates calls “double voiced discourse,” or the ability to talk to, critique and revise other texts through a process of “repetition with a signal difference” (xxii). Seiler’s play lacks this crucial feature, and in this way he is linked to other white playwrights who depicted the “folk Negro” (Pawley 163).²⁰ Yet, because Seiler for so long was thought to have been African American, inclusion of his play helps point to the differences but also the fertile interchanges between African American and mainstream (white) American drama from 1918-1938.

Ultimately, I see an analysis of the African American World War I plays as important not just in terms of filling a gap in scholarship but also as a way to reflect on the development of African American drama and the continuing struggle for racial equality in the context of more

²⁰ These playwrights include Paul Green, Eugene O’Neill, Ridgley Torrence, Dorothy Heyward, and Julia Peterkin, but many white writers, including John Dos Passos, e.e. cummings, Ransom Rideout, Howard Odum, I.A.R. Wylie, and Charles Mack, presented African American Great War soldiers in various literary genres. While many of these depictions consciously departed from the dominant minstrel images of African Americans, Leslie Sanders notes that for white writers during the thirties, “Negroes became a potent symbol of American injustice; their suffering rendered America vulnerable, particularly to its critics from the left. Moreover, their helplessness aptly reflected the feeling of helplessness experienced by most Americans in the grips of the Great Depression. The Negro’s situation *was* realistically depicted, but the depiction still functioned symbolically, as evidence of the failure of American ideals. At best, the truthful portraits served to prod the conscience of white America, not to investigate the meaning of the black experience for people living it” (15-16).

recent U.S. wars. As Harry Elam, Jr., notes, “The black playwright, . . . as playmaker, engages in processes of writing and righting black experiences” (“Cultural Capital” 1321). With his play on the word (w)righting, Elam underscores the connections between African American theatre, constructions of history, and activism. By renewing study of African American World War I drama, it seems that important and suppressed aspects of “black experiences” can be regained and learned from as we confront issues of war, race, and nationality in the twenty-first century.

Chapter One

The Home Fires Have Been Built Upon African American Flesh: Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine*

Eyes Have Seen and Mary P. Burrill's *Aftermath*

On April 6, 1917, as the news rang out that America had finally joined the conflict that had split the world in two, a debate exploded in the African American community over what its role should be in the Great War. Some leaders, such as A. Philip Randolph, found it ludicrous to support a war championing democracy while African Americans had none at home. In November 1917 he wrote, "Our aim is to appeal to reason, to lift our pens above the cringing demagoguery of the times, and above the cheap peanut politics of old reactionary Negro leaders. Patriotism has no appeal to us; justice has" (Randolph). Others, such as W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, believed African American service in the time of crisis could further African Americans' claims to equal rights after the conflict. For example, in his famous 1918 "Close Ranks" editorial, W.E.B. Du Bois urged African Americans to "forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens" (111).

Two African American playwrights who joined this debate were Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Mary P. Burrill. The two women were friends (Perkins & Stephens 81) and both wrote one-act plays that added their viewpoints to the dilemma of African American service in the Great War. For multiple reasons and audiences, they wrote the earliest and most well known African American World War I plays: Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918) and Burrill's *Aftermath* (1919). Each questions: how *American* are African Americans, and why should they fight for freedom abroad? While each one-act has a different answer, both present a blurring of

the boundary between the home front and the warfront and display idealized black men to make arguments for African American inclusion in the nation.

Dunbar-Nelson was born Alice Ruth Moore on July 19, 1875 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Her family's economic status (her father, Joseph Moore, was a merchant marine and her mother, Patricia [Wright] Moore, was a seamstress) assured her "a prominent place in [New Orleans'] Black and Creole society" (Hull "Give" 14). She attended public school in New Orleans and at the age of fifteen began a two-year teaching program at Straight University (now Dillard University). While in school, Dunbar-Nelson showed a keen interest in drama; she "participated in amateur theater, attended plays and movies regularly, and wrote and directed plays and pageants for various school, church, and community groups" (Woodard 148). After Dunbar-Nelson graduated from Straight University in 1892 she entered the teaching profession, the vocation that was to be her primary occupation until 1931. As an educator, she was active in her schools' dramatic productions. During that time, she was also involved in a myriad of other activities: she continued her education at Cornell, Columbia, and the University of Pennsylvania (Hull "Give" 14); she was a prolific journalist, a publishing author, and a social and political activist for women's suffrage, civic causes, and racial issues (Burton xxvii). She married the famous African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar in 1898 but left him in 1902 and was widowed in 1906.²¹ She married Robert J. Nelson in 1916 (Hull 15). Before her death in 1935, Dunbar-Nelson became a staunch anti-war activist and joined the American Interracial Peace Committee; she served as its Executive Secretary from 1928-1931 (Hull "Alice" 94) and "traveled the nation, delivering antiwar speeches" for the group (Hatch 169).

²¹ Dunbar-Nelson's first marriage is particularly noteworthy because Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote several novels that paint America as a war zone, such as *The Fanatics* (1901) and *Sport of the Gods* (1902), a presentation Dunbar-Nelson continues in her World War I play.

Earlier in her life, however, Dunbar-Nelson actively supported the United States' efforts in World War I. In January 1918 she began a chapter of the Circle for Negro War Relief in Wilmington, DE, and then on the 14th of June she organized a large Flag Day demonstration in Wilmington that 6,000 African Americans attended (Hull *Color* 67). Titled a "Colored Patriotic Demonstration" on the tickets to the event ("Ticket"), the parade was a public performance meant to highlight African Americans' loyalty to their country. Later, in July of 1918, Dunbar-Nelson became a field representative for the Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense.²² Because of her active support of the war, Dunbar-Nelson seems to have become a "go-to" person for African American women with questions about how to participate in the war effort. For example, Hazel B. McDaniel, an African American schoolteacher in Oklahoma, wrote Dunbar-Nelson for advice about what type of service she should engage in. In the same letter, McDaniel explains why she wants to participate: "I am impelled to enter this field for two reasons—first to serve a democracy which may someday realize that the negro is one of its important factors; second, to serve my people" ("Letter"). Brown writes that this sense of a dual purpose also pervades Dunbar-Nelson's war efforts: "Dunbar-Nelson lent a unique vision to wartime community service, as an African American woman who both supported the war and worried over its consequences for blacks in the United States" (199).²³ This dual focus—patriotism and race consciousness—is reflected in Dunbar-Nelson's World War I writing.

²² For a thorough discussion of Dunbar-Nelson's work with this group, see Nikki L. Brown's essay "War Work, Social Work, Community Work: Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Federal War Work Agencies, and Southern African American Women."

²³ Hull notes that Dunbar-Nelson could have been active in World War I service to garner public support, as she sometimes "opportunistically" based her actions on the mood of the public (*Color* 72). She reasons it is more likely, however, that Dunbar-Nelson was one of many Americans who "supported World War I but was strongly pacifist when sabers again began rattling in the late 1920s" (*Give Us* 27).

Also illuminating is Dunbar-Nelson's personal correspondence during the war years. She exchanged letters with at least two African American enlisted men (presumably former students, from the contents of the letters), and these letters provided her with first-hand accounts of the conditions African American soldiers faced in American training camps. One soldier, Ernest L. Jones of 13th Company of the Army, writes, "The trenches can't have much on this...I think if some of the boys who were so passionate to go 'over there' knew about the preliminaries they would not be so anxious" ("Letter" Feb. 7, 1918). His letter from a week earlier explains why: "Its [sic] more than putting on a uniform and walking around. There's plenty of work to do and there's none of that 'I'll do it after a while.' I've shoveled coal, snow, patched boilers, lain bricks, mixed mortar and worked in the Quartermaster's since I've been here" (Jones "Letter" Feb. 1, 1918). Jones' experience is typical of the manual labor expected of African American trainees. The other soldier, Private John B. Jones, describes the racial tensions present at his training camp in South Carolina. After learning of his battalion's transfer, he writes, "We are more than glad to leave here, and hope never to return to no part of the South again. We can't get along with the white people down here, and before any race trouble [occurs], they are taking us away" (Jones "Letter" Oct. 23, 1917). In addition to Dunbar-Nelson's extensive war work, her knowledge of the conditions African Americans soldiers faced in training camps surely impacted her writing on the subject.

In contrast to Dunbar-Nelson's extensive biography and explicit engagement with the Great War, relatively little is known about Mary P. Burrill's life. Burrill was born in Washington, D.C. (date unknown) to Clara and John Burrill. After graduating in 1901 from the M Street School, later known as Dunbar High School, she attended Emerson College in Boston (Perkins & Stephens 80). She graduated in 1904 and returned in 1929 for postgraduate work,

ultimately earning a Bachelor of Literary Interpretation degree (Roses 36). From 1905 until her retirement in 1944, Burrill was a teacher of English, speech, and dramatics at two high schools in Washington, D.C.: her alma mater, M Street, and Armstrong Technical. Burrill was an outstanding teacher who inspired several of her students to pursue acting and playwriting, most notably May Miller and Willis Richardson (Perkins & Stephens 81). She also seems to have incorporated activism into her profession; according to Burrill's colleague, Mary Hundley, "Miss Mary P. Burrill gave many years of outstanding service in the training of speech and acting...Students from underprivileged homes, whose color barred them from the usual cultural contacts, found themselves developing in speech, posture, and poise" (qtd. in Perkins 55). Burrill was also active in the theatre: she "presented her own monologue *The Other Wise Men* to capacity audiences each Christmas" (Hatch & Shine 175), and became popular for her productions of other plays (Perkins & Stephens 80).

Burrill's choice to write a play focusing on African Americans and World War I seems to make the most sense when put in the context of her interest in social activism. Her two known plays, *Aftermath* and *They That Sit in Darkness*, take a "radical stance on issues of gender and race" (Roses 36). *They That Sit in Darkness* is a moving depiction of what can happen when one is denied access to and information about contraception. It was published in Margaret Sanger's *Birth Control Revue*. Like Dunbar-Nelson, Burrill seems to have been deeply interested in women's rights and racial equality, issues at the foreground of America's involvement in the Great War.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson's Mine Eyes Have Seen

The only African American World War I play to be written, published, and produced during the war, Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (April 1918) jumps into the debate about what role African Americans should play in the Great War. The conflict in the play centers on Chris, a young African American man, who questions whether he should obey a draft order from a country that has robbed his family of life and livelihood. The play opens on a shabby apartment in a manufacturing city in the North in 1918. One sees Dan, the "crippled" older brother, and Lucy, the limping younger sister (170), at home waiting for Chris. One learns that the family used to live in the South, in a beautiful house, but whites burned it and lynched the father for trying to defend his family and home. The remaining family moved North, but it has not been better there. The mother died of pneumonia (and heartbreak). Dan was crippled in a factory, "broken on the wheel" (171). Chris comes into the house and announces he's been drafted but will not serve; he will not fight for a freedom he is denied. The whole cast of characters (including Irish and Jewish neighbors; an African American acquaintance who has served in the war; and an African American settlement worker) try to talk him out of desertion and give different arguments for why he should serve. Suddenly, a passing band plays "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Chris indicates he has changed his mind; he will join the military effort. The play closes with Chris standing at rapt attention while the music swells to a crescendo.

Because of this seemingly patriotic ending, *Mine Eyes Have Seen* is often read as a conservative appeal for African Americans' acceptance of the status quo, an uncomplicated affirmative answer to the debate raging about whether African Americans should serve in World War I. A complication of that approach is necessary. The play *is* calling for African American participation in World War I, but its message does not stop there. The play focuses on a blurring

of boundaries between the home front and the warfront, the European and the American, the African American and the white American, and the disabled and the able bodied. I argue that this disintegration of boundaries first critiques the nation and then creates an argument for African Americans' full citizenship rights, using language and performance to gain access to the "imagined" community of the nation.

Scholars' interpretations of the play vary widely. One group (Gloria Hull, Claire Tylee, Yvonne Shafer, and, most recently, David Davis) read the play as a clear-cut piece of propaganda meant to convince African Americans to join the war effort. For example, Tylee posits that "Dunbar-Nelson was no revolutionary" (155) and her play is "part of a conservative Black American cultural movement" ("Womanist" 161). On the opposite side of the spectrum, Nellie McKay and Patricia Young read the play as a subversive critique of African American participation in the Great War. Young, echoing McKay, describes the play as a "biting satire on the political blindness that prevents people from seeing how they both participate in and contribute to the perpetuation of their own oppression" (53). As Maria Christine Beach points out (113), McKay's and Young's arguments seem based on the notion that Dunbar-Nelson was an antiwar activist during World War I. Actually, Dunbar-Nelson did not begin her work with the American Friends Peace Committee until much later, in 1928 (Beach 115). Thus, arguments for reading the play as a full-fledged opposition to African American involvement in the war seem unconvincing.

To add more weight to the first group's claims, the publication and production history of *Mine Eyes Have Seen* seem to back up a reading of the play as a conservative appeal for African Americans to overlook race consciousness and instead put their country first. The one-act was first published in April 1918 in *The Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) founded in 1910 by W.E.B. Du Bois. Three years earlier, *The Crisis* had created a Drama Committee to promote the creation of a “Negro Theatre” that would “encourage black playwrights to address the black experience” (Tekinay 712). *The Crisis’s* actions had a lasting impact on African American drama, specifically on African American female playwrights. These women “took up leading roles in the Little Theatre Movement, which was largely removed from the commercial pressures of professional production. The publication of one-act plays in black periodicals was a major component of the movement” (Burton xx). With traditional commercial avenues for publication and production blocked for African American female playwrights, magazines such as *The Crisis* became their medium for reaching audiences. By 1918, the magazine had a circulation of 74,000, and “was seen as the most influential organ of radical Black American thought” (Tylee *War* 28).

When *Mine Eyes Have Seen* was published in April of that year, however, the magazine was not so “radical.” Under considerable governmental pressure, the magazine toned down any critique of the government, as Claire Tylee notes: “The journal was already being monitored for breaches of the Espionage Act of 1917 and the forthcoming Sedition Act. Early in 1918 the NAACP had been rebuked by the Justice Department for Du Bois’s powerful attacks on the government, and only avoided prosecution by promising self-censorship” (*War* 28). As evidence of the new policy, in the April issue’s editorial Du Bois included an appeal for six hundred seventy-seven African American volunteers to enlist in the 167th Field Artillery Brigade for duties as varied as Horse-shoers, Scouts, and Corporals (“Lead Kindly” 268). It was under this “self-censoring,” patriotic atmosphere that Dunbar-Nelson’s play was published, a fact that lends itself to interpretations of the play as a conservative endorsement of the U.S. government’s policies.

While *Mine Eyes Have Seen* was known primarily through its publication in *The Crisis*, it was also produced numerous times²⁴ and the accounts we have of its productions similarly emphasize patriotism. Through letters requesting permission to stage the work, we know the play was performed at Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. in the spring of 1918 (Posey). Based on an interview from Dunbar-Nelson's niece, Pauline Young, we also know the play was produced at Howard High School, but the exact date is unknown.²⁵ Other known productions include one in May of 1926 at "The Stevens School," place unspecified (possibly Washington, D.C.), for a "dramatic festival" (Beach 118). In addition, the Pilgrim Baptist Church of St. Paul, Minnesota produced the play three times, for various audiences and purposes: first, on May 9, 1918 for the May Pageant of the "Invincible Sunday School Class" ("May"); second, on June 14, 1918 for "the benefit of the 16th Battalion Drum Corps"; and third, on July 18, 1918 to help raise money for "decorating the Social Game Room of Uncle Sam's Club" ("Mine Eyes"). We know

²⁴ This fact contradicts what most scholars state about the play's history; almost all scholars report that the play had only one known production, on April 10, 1918 at Howard High School. (Scholars who give this date and location as the only known production include Brown-Guillory, Burton, Hatch and Shine, Hill and Hatch, Perkins and Stephens [they list it as the first production], Tylee, and Woodard.) My research in the Dunbar-Nelson papers has shown that this date and location are not correct, and seem to stem from Gloria Hull's 1987 statement that "On April 10, 1918, Dunbar-Nelson granted the Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., permission to stage the work" (*Color* 72). What Hull seems to be referring to is a letter written to Dunbar-Nelson by Thomas Posey on April 10, 1918. He writes, "A club of Junior Students in the Dunbar High School has been formed for the purpose of raising money for the Red Cross. We have noticed your play, "Mine Eyes Have Seen" (sic), in the current issue of the *Crisis* (sic), and desire to produce this play at Dunbar some time in May" (Posey 4/10). Hull is correct in stating that Dunbar-Nelson let the group produce the play, but other scholars have misinterpreted Hull's statement to mean that the club actually produced the play in April, which is not the case. In fact, Posey wrote to Dunbar-Nelson again on May 2, 1918, to tell her that plans had changed: "The Junior Class wishes to produce your play "Mine Eyes Have Seen," for their rhetorical on May 21, instead of for the Red Cross, as was originally intended" (Posey 5/2). Some scholars have also stated that the April 10, 1918 production happened at Howard High School, where Dunbar-Nelson taught.

²⁵ In a 1973 interview Young stated that Dunbar-Nelson "taught us English in high school. She produced her play and we all took parts. The audience loved it" (Hatch and Shine 170).

the most about the last production because a program survives in the Dunbar-Nelson papers and a review of the performance was published in *The Appeal*, an African American St. Paul newspaper. According to both, rousing music preceded the play; all who gathered sang “The Star Spangled Banner” and a group of women sang a selection of folk songs. The focal point was Dunbar-Nelson’s play, directed by Nellie Griswold Francis.²⁶ Described as “a very intense little playlet,” *Mine Eyes Have Seen* was met with approval: “The characters in the play were admirably portrayed and delighted the audience greatly...The whole affair was happily conceived and very satisfactorily carried out” (“Mine Eyes”). Part of the play’s success seems to have been its patriotic element: those present sang the national anthem, the proceeds benefited enlisted men, and the program describes the play as “A Patriotic Playlet in One Act” and includes a portion of W.E.B Du Bois’s famous “Close Ranks” editorial (“Program”). All of these factors, from *The Crisis*’s more conservative stance to the patriotic emphasis in the productions, give credence to the scholars who read the play as a conservative justification of African Americans’ loyalty to a country that showed them none.

Yet, it is important to keep in mind that amidst the patriotic fervor the play raises serious questions about African Americans’ ties to the United States. Recent scholars have recognized this aspect of the play and have offered more nuanced readings of its messages. Marilyn Elkins notes that the ending of the play is “complicated; she [Dunbar-Nelson] allows the audience to understand his [Chris’s] dilemma and to understand its unfairness. Therefore, her appeal for black enlistment is certainly...qualified” (59). Koritha A. Mitchell adds that, while Chris is swayed towards military service by the end of the play, “it becomes clear that his impending absence will devastate his family, just as his father’s has” (219). Thus, while the play does

²⁶ Also known as Mrs. W.T. Francis, Francis was a prominent St. Paul citizen and was President of the Everywoman Suffrage Club that campaigned for gender and racial equality (Reis 118).

advocate African American military involvement in its final moments, it also spends the first three-fourths of the play presenting convincing reasons why they should *not* serve, information that is hard to forget, even in the stimulating music of the play's end. I would add that the play gains this complexity in large part due to its blurring of boundaries, a theme that lets the play critique America at the same time that it argues for African American inclusion in the nation.

The most thoroughly problematized boundary in the play is the one between the home front and the warfront; Dunbar-Nelson repeatedly equates the family's life in America to the horrors of war. Using Jennifer James's theory of the dual war motif in African American literature, including the use of the "pen as a weapon" (9), I argue that the play does not simply advocate African American assimilation into the nation. Rather, the play points out problematic aspects of life in America and can be seen as a "weapon" demanding social change.

The theme of the family home becoming a shattered war zone is first raised when Lucy, the younger sister who has a "pathetic face" and walks with a limp (170), reminisces about the family's house in the South. Speaking to the oldest brother, Dan, she says, "wasn't it better in the old days when we were back home—in the little house with the garden, and you and father coming home nights and mother getting supper...we didn't have to eat and live in the kitchen then, and—" Dan finishes her sentence by saying, "And the notices posted on the fence for us to leave town because niggers had no business having such a decent home" (171).²⁷ Lucy's idyllic remembrances of the family's home contrast sharply with Dan's reality check: the home in the South was no safe haven. It was an active war zone where the family was targeted. Through their discussion, one learns that the family's house was burned and the father lynched, "shot down like

²⁷ All quotes from *Mine Eyes Have Seen* are taken from the version of the play in Hatch and Shine's *Black Theatre U.S.A.: Plays by African Americans 1847 to Today*. New York: Free P, 1996. 170-174.

a dog for daring to defend his house” (171). As Mitchell points out, Dunbar-Nelson “equates the mob and the military by giving them similar weapons” (219). These details emphasize the lack of distinction between the home front and a war zone; the family’s house, rather than being a place of comfort and safety, becomes a piece of smoking rubble, and the father is a casualty of the war.

After his death the family leaves the South, but the play shows that the North is a war zone as well—a *different* sort of war. The family experiences no more hateful signs outside their residence or outright lynchings. Instead, the play emphasizes a combination of racial and economic struggles in the North. For example, the cause of Dan’s injury is being able to find work only in a “factory of hell,” a place that has no safety measures and treats its workers as if they were disposable. Lucy also gets caught up in the economic war. The Irish neighbor, Mrs. O’Neill, tells her, “they do be sayin’ as how down by the chain stores they be a raid on the potatoes an’ ef ye’re wantin’ some, ye’d better be after gittin’ into yer things an’ comin’ wid me. I kin keep the crowd off yer game foot” (172).²⁸ Just as there is competition for resources in the theatre of war, Lucy must “fight” for the limited resources available in the tenement. The family’s economic situation is a competition—one that can turn violent. Lucy, with her “game foot,” needs O’Neill’s help to survive it. It is as if they have created their own sort of troop, a mixture of different backgrounds and abilities, that defends one another. This cooperation is a bit surprising; traditionally, capitalism pitted Irish and African Americans against each other, with

²⁸ Two scholars, Beach and Shafer, note that Mrs. O’Neill’s dialect is the only one in the play; everyone else speaks standard English. Beach simply notes that this choice contrasts sharply with some white playwrights who gave African American characters exaggerated dialects (116), but Shafer criticizes Dunbar-Nelson’s dialogue: “Because it [the play] is essentially realistic, the absence of characterization by means of the dialogue weakens the drama and creates a rather strange effect: there are African Americans, a Jew, and an Irish woman, but they all sound very much the same with the exception of a slight attempt to depict an Irish accent. Certainly not all African Americans speak, or spoke, in a dialect, but the fact that everyone speaks the same indicates the playwright’s avoidance of one element of realism in the drama” (386).

both groups competing for the same resources.²⁹ There is also a tradition of anti-Irish jokes in African American folklore; Irish immigrants were portrayed in African American humor as “quintessential green-horn immigrants” who were “invariably incompetent and lazy,” the opposite of Mrs. O’Neill’s portrayal (Levine 303).³⁰ Thus, the play’s presentation of the women working together is fairly forward thinking and perhaps reflects Dunbar-Nelson rethinking the notion of a racial struggle as a class struggle.³¹ Even with the women’s rejection of class or racial “warfare,” the boundary between home front and warfront has been severely blurred. War is very present, right at the family’s door, not thousands of miles away in Europe.

This theme continues in Chris’s reaction to Bill Harvey’s tales of the war. Harvey, a neighbor who is a “muleteer” and has experienced the war first hand, tells the household of German atrocities: “They crucified little children.” Chris, unmoved, retorts, “Well, what’s that to us? They’re little white children. But here our fellow-countrymen throw our little black babies in the flame” (173). Chris points out the obvious: the (reported) atrocities of the German army are

²⁹ For example, Noel Ignatiev chronicles the competition between the two groups and calls it, in one instance, “perpetual warfare” (120). This attitude was fueled by the Irish immigrant’s need to “enter the white race” as a “strategy to secure an advantage in a competitive society” (Ignatiev 2).

³⁰ The anti-Irish joke cycles became popular in the mid-nineteenth century after the famine-induced migrations and stayed popular throughout the twentieth century (Levine 301). In fact, the year before Dunbar-Nelson published the play, in 1917, Elsie Clews Parsons wrote, “Anecdotes about Irishmen have a distinct vogue” (quoted in Levine 301). Levine argues that there were several reasons for the joke cycles’ popularity: they “allowed Negroes to join the white majority in looking down upon and feeling superior to the strange folkways of an alien group...Irish jokes became a means of taking revenge upon these newcomers who had learned to hate Negroes so quickly and efficiently. Perhaps more importantly, they allowed Negroes to openly ridicule and express contempt for white people. The Irish characters of black jokelore became surrogates for all the other whites against whom it could be dangerous to speak openly” (302).

³¹ Gloria T. Hull argues that the play’s “interracialism” corresponds to “the current thrust of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and its organ, *The Crisis*, as well as with Dunbar-Nelson’s *own* integrationist ethics” (*Color* 72).

equal to the everyday, often ignored, atrocities of American society. Chris repeatedly makes this point and uses it to argue against joining the fighting:

Am I to take up the cause of a lot of kings and politicians who play with men's souls, as if they are cards—dealing them out, a hand here, in the Somme—a hand there, in Palestine—a hand there, in the Alps—a hand there, in Russia—and because the cards don't match well, call it a misdeal, gather them up, throw them in the discard, and call for a new deal of a million human, suffering souls? And must I be the Deuce of Spades? (171)

Chris uses a gaming metaphor to comment on what he sees as the economic and racial causes of the war, specifically the attitudes of the ruling class. His speech also alludes, however, to the disposability of African American lives in the minds of white Americans at large,³² specifically the white officers in charge of African American soldiers.³³ Chris's point is that this “throw them in the discard” mentality is just as atrocious as what the Germans are doing in France.

Another example of the violence of the home front being explicitly compared to a war zone comes when Lucy first learns Chris has been drafted. She laments, “Oh, it can't be! They won't take you from us! And shoot you down, too?” (171). On one level, Lucy is referring to Chris being wounded or killed on the battlefield. By adding the “too” at the end of her speech,

³² According to the NAACP's 1919 publication *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States*, 2,522 African Americans were lynched from 1889 to 1918. This number, of course, does not account for African Americans who died because of poor working conditions, lack of nutrition, etc.

³³ Du Bois notes that officers for African American troops, specifically stevedores, were primarily Southern with the majority being “‘nigger’ drivers of the most offensive type. This harsh method showed itself in long hours, excessive tasks, little opportunity for leaves and recreation, holding of black soldiers to barracks when in the same community white soldiers had the privilege of the town, severe punishments for slight offenses, abusive language and sometimes corporal punishment. . . Worked often like slaves, twelve and fourteen hours a day, these men were ill-fed, poorly clad, indifferently housed, often beaten, always ‘Jim-Crowed’ and insulted” (“An Essay Toward” 65).

however, she is also referring to her father's murder by a mob of whites. Her statement equates the violence of war with life at home: neither location is safe. Bill Harvey also makes a connection between the brutality of the war and lynchings on American soil. He describes what he's seen "over the top": "Mules, rough-necks, wires, mud, dead bodies, stench, terror!" (173). Harvey is trying to paint a picture of No-Man's Land, but he ends up describing a reality of America the members of the family have faced first hand: lynching, with its "wires" and ropes, "dead bodies, stench, [and] terror."³⁴ By highlighting the *lack* of distinction between the atrocities of World War I and the racial and economic violence facing African Americans at "home," *Mine Eyes Have Seen* critiques the United States' citizens, governmental policies (its failure to pass an antilynching law), and practices. Rather than being a wholehearted advertisement for African American enlistment, it brings to light a myriad of problems within the country and, by doing so, is a "weapon" demanding social change (James 9).

The second set of boundaries *Mine Eyes Have Seen* problematizes are those between different nations and races. Dan, who continually argues for African American involvement in the war, first puts forth this idea. He tells Chris, "Love of humanity is above the small considerations of time or place or race or sect. Can't you be big enough to feel pity for the little crucified French children—for the ravished Polish girls, even as their mothers must have felt sorrow, if they had known, for *our* burned and maimed little ones? Oh, Mothers of Europe, we be of one blood, you and I!" (173). Dan's speech, based on anti-German propaganda, is much like Chris's earlier comments. It connects the reported German atrocities of murder and rape with the violence against African Americans in the United States. Yet Dan takes the idea one

³⁴ This doubling is highlighted further when one looks at the play's position in *The Crisis*. On the left-hand page directly preceding Dunbar-Nelson's play, an article ironically called "Safe for Democracy" juxtaposes a lynching in Russia (as a result of the Bolshevik revolution) to a lynching in America, implying that neither war zone is safe or democratic.

step further. His language, with its emphasis on “love of humanity” and “one blood,” argues that the boundary between European and American, black and white, is a false one, and should be blurred.³⁵ The play seems to be arguing that racial and national categories are socially constructed; Dan recognizes that, in spite of differences, the French and Polish mothers are human, just as he is. Dan’s feelings are shared by the Jewish neighbor, Jake, who states, “There isn’t a wrong you can name that your race has endured that mine has not suffered, too” (172). Mark Whalan notes that through these lines *Aftermath* “provides a surrogate racial bond,” a bond to Allied Europe and other races, through “shared victimhood” (35). Thus, the play still holds an implicit critique of America, but it has developed into an argument for a complex notion of nationality and identity—that of being aware of oneself as “one blood” with the rest of the world.

The play ends with this blurring of boundaries between national and racial groups, yet it retains an argument for African American citizenship rights. One example of this delicate balance comes when Lucy changes her mind and encourages Chris to follow his draft orders. She implores, “your race is calling you to carry on its good name, and with that, the voice of humanity is calling to us all” (173). Lucy’s argument centers on *both* advancing the race and the notion of “one blood,” or a shared humanity. Julia, Chris’s girlfriend, has a similar change of heart: “Chris—it *is* our country—our race” (173). This seemingly disjointed statement makes sense in light of the dissolution of boundaries Lucy and Dan have already espoused in the play. Julia suddenly sees that the line between European American and African American might not be so solid. Thus, America is “our country” for African Americans too. At the same time, however,

³⁵ Dan’s word choice also calls to mind Pauline Hopkins’s 1902-1903 novel *Of One Blood*, the first African American novel about African characters and with an African setting. In the novel, Hopkins “attempts to counter turn-of-the-century racism by looking toward Africa and its past with pride” (Japtok 403). Thus, while Dan uses the phrase “one blood” to indicate a universal human bond, Hopkins used it to refer to solidarity between all people of African descent.

she does not forget about inequality in the nation; she also says “our race,” indicating Chris’s enlistment will further the cause of racial equality.

Chris’s music-inspired decision to follow his draft order³⁶ also emphasizes the dual message of “one blood” and equal rights. Cornelia, the settlement worker who pops in when she hears about Chris’s draft card, repeats a line from “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”: “As He died to make men holy, let us die to make them free!” (174). Cornelia’s choice of line is an example of displaced transmission;³⁷ the patriotic anthem takes on new meaning in this context. The line first references Christ, the Christian Son of God, who sacrificed himself for the eternal salvation of humans. The second half of the line, in this situation, refers to Chris, who will be sacrificing himself on the battlefields of World War I. Thus, the play makes an interesting comparison between Christ and Chris; they have similar names and both resign themselves to serving as sacrificial lambs. The play seems to be glorifying the African American soldier here, putting Chris’s impending sacrifice on the same level as Christ’s.³⁸ The two men’s purposes, however, are distinct. This difference can be found in the line’s final word, “free.” From one perspective, the freedom could be the “democracy” America joined World War I to defend;

³⁶ One must note that the play is not explicit that Chris joins the military. Because of this ambiguity, scholars such as Hill and Hatch write that “the play leaves the final decision squarely in the minds of the audience” (189). Because of the context of the play, however, and due to Dunbar-Nelson’s notes on a manuscript of the play in her archive (she writes that Chris “decides to go [to war] because he has seen ‘the glory of the Lord’”), I join other scholars such as Mitchell, Perkins, Miller, Beach, and Elkins in reading the play as ending with Chris’s acceptance of his draft notice.

³⁷ Roach’s term displaced transmission describes the ways in which “popular behaviors are resituated in new locales. Much more happens through transmission by surrogacy than the reproduction of tradition. New traditions may also be invented and others overturned” (28-29). Roach argues that when behaviors are transplanted to new places they come to mean something new because of the impossibility of exact replication.

³⁸ For more discussion of the role of Christianity in the play see Craig Prentiss’s “Terrible Laughing God” and Trudier Harris’s “Before the Strength, the Pain: Portraits of Elderly Black Women in Early Twentieth-Century Anti-Lynching Plays.”

Chris will die to “make them [the citizens of Europe] free” from tyranny. However, in light of the play’s continual theme of the home front of America being a warfront for African Americans, the word “free” also refers to the African American struggle for equality in the United States; the play is arguing that Chris’s service will help “make them [African Americans] free” from the tyranny of racial and economic injustice in their homes.

One can also read the song lyrics as a reference to Chris’s father. Mitchell argues, “Ultimately, *Mine Eyes Have Seen* demonstrates that both lynching and war unfairly claim black men’s lives” (219), and that the play “ends as it began. Readers see the damage that the father’s murder has caused and know that Chris’s death will complete the family’s descent” (222). This implied doom fits perfectly with the play’s messages; rather than being a conservative mouthpiece for pro-war propaganda, the play shows the complexities of African Americans’ decisions to serve, and it critiques the nation that allows black men to be “unfairly claim[ed]” by death. It also emphasizes the blurred boundary between the home front and warfront for African Americans; both men die in a war zone. The father is killed in the racial and economic war in the United States while Chris will likely be killed in Europe.

The third major boundary *Mine Eyes Have Seen* blurs is that between able bodied masculinity and disabled emasculation, a binary the play sets up from its opening. As the curtain rises one sees Dan, described in the character list as “the cripple,” sitting in a chair, “propped by faded pillows, his feet covered with a patch-work quilt” (170). Here Dan’s disability is linked to emasculation; he has no agency or energy and sits limply in the corner covered by a quilt and pillows, traditional feminine symbols of warmth, softness, and women’s domestic and artistic work. Dan was “maimed for life in a factory of hell...broken on the wheel” (171). The depiction of his “maimed” body can be seen as an example of kinesthetic imagination, where the body

becomes a receptacle of memory for, most immediately, Northern factory conditions, but also the horrors of the antebellum South, slavery, and the middle passage, places and times where displays of African American masculinity were typically suppressed. Dan's twisted limbs can be read as symbolic of the effects of the hundreds of years of oppression African Americans have faced on American soil, for as Gloria Hull suggests, Dan's body is symbolically "crippled by racial prejudice" (xlix).

In contrast to Dan's "crippled" and emasculated body, Chris is able bodied and exhibits traditionally masculine behaviors such as defiance and anger (171). It is interesting to note, then, that Chris views himself as maimed and emasculated as well. He vents, "Must I go and fight for the nation that let my father's murder go unpunished? That killed my mother—that took away my chances for making a man out of myself? Look at us—you—Dan, a shell of a man...And me, with a fragment of an education, and no chance—only half a man" (171). Chris equates both of them with a lack of masculinity; Dan is a "shell of a man" because of his paralysis, and Chris is "half a man" because he is ineffectual—he has done nothing for his family. Chris acknowledges he is not physically handicapped like Dan, but he contends that racist American society has denied him the traditional avenues of displaying masculinity: education, money, and power. It is interesting to note here that Dunbar-Nelson presents racist America as the emasculating force rather than the war. This presentation blurs the boundary between home front and warfront further, because World War I, not the home front, typically is presented in early twentieth-century literature as the cause of emasculation.³⁹

The blurring of boundaries continues as the play presents Dan, physically powerless, as the one who possesses the traditionally masculine traits of bravery and the desire to go to war.

³⁹ See, for example, Gilbert and Gubar ("Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women and the Great War"), Hemingway (*A Farewell to Arms*), etc.

For example, when Chris refuses to accept his family's and neighbors' reasons for joining in the war effort, Dan "half tears himself from the chair, the upper part of his body writhing, while the lower part is inert, dead." He cries, "Oh, God! If I were but whole and strong! If I could only prove to a doubting world of what stuff my people are made!" (173). This quote shows more attention being paid to Dan's body, with his "dead," ineffectual legs serving as symbols of the "crippling" nature of racism on African Americans' ability to act. This image contrasts sharply, however, with his "writhing" torso that implies a tormented desire to serve his country and prove his race strong and noble. Dan's announcement, full of bravery and bravado, shows that even though physically unable he realizes war's potential as a place for African Americans to display masculinity. All of these shifts in boundaries, from Chris being emasculated to Dan displaying bravery, critique the United States and the racism that denies displays of masculinity to African American males.

At the same time, one can view the play's ultimate presentation of African American masculinity as an argument for African American inclusion in the nation. During the play's final moments, Chris reconciles himself to Dan's reasoning and agrees to serve in the war. After he makes this decision, the play puts a special emphasis on Chris's body. James argues that this focus on the black male body in African American war literature is connected to the fight for full citizenship rights in the United States. She states:

The perfected body within African American literature, particularly idealized representations of the black male soldier-citizen, became part of a larger set of cultural images designed to refute characterizations of deficiency and/or offer evidence of bodily rehabilitation, both tasks fueled by the necessity of imagining a black body poised to take up its position within the national body politic. (16)

Using James's theory, I argue that the play's focus on Chris's body as he makes his decision to serve personifies the body politic and argues for African Americans' "fitness" for equal American citizenship.

The presentation of Chris as the "idealized...black male soldier-citizen" comes when a passing band plays "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." As the song grows louder, Dan starts to sing along: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!" Suddenly, Chris "straightens his shoulders" and cries, "And mine!" (174). Chris seemingly realizes⁴⁰ that serving in the military is a way not only to serve his country and honor the race, but also a way to display masculinity, and he decides to grasp that chance. He straightens his back in a move reminiscent of a soldier coming to attention. As the curtain closes, one sees Chris frozen in this position: "As the music draws nearer, the group breaks up, and the whole room rushes to the window and looks out. Chris remains in the center of the floor, rigidly at attention, a rapt look on his face" (174). He stands "rigid" in this position, the ultimate display of masculinity that refutes the popular view of African American males as emasculated or "deficient" (James 16). The play's closing image reinforces James's theory: Chris's body has become the idealized black male soldier-citizen, an image that literalizes African Americans' qualification for full inclusion in the body politic (James 16).

Ultimately, *Mine Eyes Have Seen* is much more than a conservative appeal for African Americans to join the United States' war efforts in Europe. Through its consistent theme of blurred boundaries the play levels a severe critique of the racist attitudes, actions, and policies of the United States. Ironically, though it includes African American, Irish American, and Jewish characters and endorses the notion of "one-blood," the play's use of anti-German propaganda

⁴⁰ I say "seemingly" because the play gives no explicit explanation for Chris's change of heart.

falls into its own moment of prejudice; the “one-blood” theme does not extend to Germans. Despite this omission, the play runs a delicate balance: it supports the war but shows African Americans are unwilling to forget about the injustice at home. In this way, the play is similar to African American women’s war work, described by Nikki Brown: it “manifested two specific identities. One demonstrated genuine loyalty to the United States, expressed by an eagerness to work with established organizations for the Allied cause. An alternate identity, committed to African American uplift and advancement, embodied a dedication to black soldiers, families, and communities” (207). At the same time, through the play’s final emphasis on an idealized black male body, *Mine Eyes Have Seen* also presents an argument for full African American inclusion in the body politic. Thus, the play is not a conservative mouthpiece for African American participation in the Great War. Its critique of America and demand for equal rights were perhaps veiled enough to get past the censors of *The Crisis*, but they are not so invisible as to negate the subversive potential of *Mine Eyes Have Seen*.

Mary P. Burrill’s *Aftermath* and African American Performance of Nationality

In contrast to the wartime creation and publication of *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, Mary P. Burrill’s 1919 *Aftermath* was written in the months after the Armistice and before the violent “Red Summer” of 1919. Thus, it focuses less on whether African American men should join the armed forces and more on what awaited the demobilized black soldiers when they returned to America. The play presents the homecoming of John, a heroic World War I veteran, to his family’s cabin in South Carolina. Upon hearing that his father has been lynched in his absence, John picks up his military-issued guns and strides out the door. In one sense, the play forecasts historical fact; returning African American soldiers faced resistance to their newfound agency,

and the “Red Summer” of 1919 saw race riots and an escalating number of lynchings, all while the U.S. Congress refused to pass an anti-lynching law (Rampersad xxii, Krasner 233).⁴¹ On another level, the play presents a series of crossed borders; it shows a blurring of boundaries between the home front and the warfront, and between Africa and America. I find it interesting that scholarship about the play does not deal with these crossed borders; in fact, scholarship tends to analyze *Aftermath* as a lynching drama (one notable for its use of World War I) or summarizes the play while mentioning its references to the Great War.⁴² George Hutchinson, Claire Tylee, Maria Beach, and Mark Whalan offer the most thorough investigations of *Aftermath* in relation to World War I, yet none probe the border crossing in the play. Instead, Hutchinson argues that the play supports a “collective black national identity,” a specifically *American* national identity (“Aftermath” 189). In an effort to further understanding of this play as African American World War I drama, I argue that the play, with its blurring of boundaries, presents a more nuanced conception of African American identity, one that stresses African Americans’ “Americanness” while also highlighting their African heritage as an integral part of their American identity.

To understand the play’s emphasis on this theme, it is helpful to investigate the publication and production history of *Aftermath*. The play was published in April 1919 in the

⁴¹ Patricia Alzatia Young writes that this documentary effort was Burrill’s goal: “Mary Burrill is concerned with authenticating the hostility which confronted returning veterans” (9). She also states that *Aftermath* was “another drama written in support of the NAACP’s unsuccessful anti-lynch campaign...This work is important for its graphic presentation of the brutality and injustice of lynching” (12). I agree but would add that the play is notable for other reasons, outlined above.

⁴² Allen, Brown-Guillory, France, Hamalian and Hatch, Hatch and Shine, Hill and Hatch, Krasner, and Perkins (in *Black Female Playwrights*) all refer to *Aftermath* and World War I, but they do not offer substantial analysis of this issue in the play. The other treatment of *Aftermath* in scholarship has focused on the play as a lynching drama (Trudier Harris, Will Harris, Perkins and Stephens, Stephens, Young).

predominantly white, radical leftist periodical *The Liberator* (Hamalian and Hatch 135). Why did Burrill choose to seek publication in *The Liberator*? The magazine was a continuation of *The Masses*, a socialist magazine that the U.S. government shut down in 1918 for its vocal opposition to U.S. participation in World War I. Shortly thereafter, however, Max Eastman “resurrected” it as *The Liberator* (Hutchinson “The Harlem” 251). While the magazine’s audience was “almost completely white” (Hutchinson “The Harlem” 266), it had important ties to the Harlem Renaissance and many important African American writers, such as Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer, are known to have read it (Hutchinson 264-65). Hughes goes so far as to write, “I read every copy of that magazine I could get my hands on during my high school days. I learned from it the revolutionary attitude toward Negroes” (qtd. in Hutchinson 264). Others, such as Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, Fenton Johnson, and Georgia Douglas Johnson, published in the magazine, and McKay also edited the magazine for a time (Hutchinson 264).

George Hutchinson writes that from a twentieth-century viewpoint *The Liberator* does not seem to be a champion for racial equality. For its time, however, it pushed farther than most white publications: “The Liberator, often citing John Brown, consistently argued for the necessity of racial self-defense, by violence if necessary, and repeatedly published works emphasizing the irony of (white) American freedom being bought with black lives. This struggle, in turn, they regarded as an important aspect of a worldwide class struggle” (“The Harlem” 250). *The Liberator*’s emphasis on “racial self-defense” fits well with *Aftermath*’s presentation of John as a militant New Negro.

Hutchinson goes further in his explanation of why Burrill published in *The Liberator* by breaking down what other magazines were focusing on at the time:

This is not a play *The Nation*—opposed, like *The Masses* and *The Liberator*, to American participation in the Great War but, unlike them, resolutely pacifist—would have approved; nor does it fit the *Crisis* line that typically portrayed black soldiers as Christ-like saviors risking their lives in Europe for a worthy cause; or *Opportunity*'s favored type of folk (as opposed to propaganda) play. It also embarrasses the pro-war line *The New Republic* had taken. But it perfectly matches the editorial bent of *The Liberator* as it combines vernacular drama with class consciousness, a view of the Great War as an elaborate confidence game played on the oppressed peoples who fought in it for their overlords, and a stimulus to open rebellion against American racial oppression. (“The Harlem” 263)

Hutchinson's description of why *Aftermath* fits so perfectly into *The Liberator* is important to keep in mind when analyzing the play; more than documenting the trials of African American soldiers coming home from World War I, the play is a radical call for African American militancy, a fact that is highlighted by the play's place of publication.

The Liberator also gave Burrill's play exposure. According to a book review in February of 1919, *The Liberator* had a circulation of forty thousand (“Two American” 39). This audience gave Burrill a large platform from which to spread her message. Apparently, she was successful. According to Rachel France, “Within a few months of its publication, *Aftermath* was being heralded as one of the hopes for a new Negro drama by *Crisis*, the literary organ of the NAACP, then presided over by W.E.B. Du Bois” (56). France is referring to Willis Richardson's essay

“The Hope of a Negro Drama” published in *The Crisis* in November 1919.⁴³ He writes that, in contrast to straight propaganda plays, “there is another kind of play; the play that shows the soul of a people; and the soul of this people is truly worth showing” (Richardson 438). He posits that playwright Ridgley Torrence, with *Granny Maumee*; *The Rider of Dreams*; and *Simon, the Cyrenain*, has accomplished this goal, as has Burrill: “Miss Mary Burrill in ‘Aftermath’ has also written a fine play; and these two examples prove the richness of the subject matter” (Richardson 438). It is interesting to note here that Richardson has classified *Aftermath* as *not* being solely a propaganda play. This classification is not common in current scholarship.⁴⁴ Despite this difference in scholarly opinions, Richardson’s attention to *Aftermath* was important; Patricia Young argues that Richardson’s evaluation of *Aftermath* gave the play “its rightful acclaim and acknowledged Burrill’s powerful writing” (55).

This attention to *Aftermath*’s publication is important. The play was not produced until 1928, but because of its publication in *The Liberator*, it was relatively well known. Thus, attention to the play’s literary qualities and stage directions becomes imperative. In addition, according to Carol Dawn Allen, “Black women of the early twentieth century realized...that their theatrical works would, in all probability, be more often read than beheld. Magazine prizes and strong editors guaranteed that their texts would have a forum, but the outlets for full-play production beyond the school or community library auditorium were extremely rare” (90). While *Aftermath* was eventually produced, the almost ten-year span between publication and production speaks to the atmosphere Allen discusses.

⁴³ Nine years earlier, Richardson was a pupil of Burrill’s at the M Street School (later known as Dunbar High School) and went on to become the first African American playwright to have a non-musical play produced on Broadway, *The Chip Woman’s Fortune* (1923).

⁴⁴ Allen (101), Brown-Guillory (9), France (56), Krasner (233), Tylee (161), Young (12); Hutchinson argues that the play is a mix of propaganda and folk play (“The Harlem” 262).

Aftermath's only known production was in the David Belasco Sixth Annual Little Theatre Tournament (also known as the Belasco Cup) on May 8, 1928, held at the Frolic Theatre in New York City. It was produced by the Krigwa Players and the Workers' Drama League (Perkins "Strange" 79).⁴⁵ According to an article in the *New York Times* announcing the tournament, actors included Marion King, Siegie Bell, Helen McIntosh, James Brown, Margaret Foster, and Charles Burroughs, who was also the director ("Prison Fare" 21). A May, 1928 article in the *New York Times* gives a full history of the contest, including a description of how the competition was structured and judged:

In the New York tournaments four one-act plays are produced each evening by four different little theatre groups. This continues from Monday until Friday or until twenty plays have been shown. Five judges witness all these productions and select four out of the twenty as the best presentations. They are judged according to the following standard: Fifty per cent. (sic) for presentation, meaning interpretation, or 'how well the idea of the play is gotten over'; 25 per cent. for acting, 15 per cent. for setting and 10 per cent. for selection of play. ("The Torchbearers" 108)

In the 1928 competition, *Aftermath* was one of four plays produced on the second night of the tournament. It did not fare well in the contest. We know of two reviews of the production, and neither is positive. The first, from the *New York Times*, seems rather condescending: "The Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre, presumably from Harlem, went in for what appeared to be

⁴⁵ The Krigwa Players Little Theatre Group was founded in 1926 by W.E.B. Du Bois in New York City. The group was devoted to producing African American theatre by, for, near, and about African Americans. Krigwa Little Theatre groups soon spread across the U.S. including Cleveland, Washington D.C., and Denver (Hill and Hatch 222). The Workers' Drama League was also founded in 1926 by Ida Rauh, Jasper Deeter, Mike Gold, and John Howard Lawson. It encouraged political radicalism and fostered new playwrights (Sarlos 164-65).

a folk play. ‘Aftermath,’ the work of Mary Burrill, contains an excellent situation, but suffers both in the writing and performance” (“Prison Fare” 21). The unidentified reviewer makes two interesting assumptions. The first comes when s/he states that the company is “presumably from Harlem.” One wonders why s/he presumes this—is it because of actors’ and characters’ skin colors? If so, that seems faulty reasoning at best. Perhaps s/he knew where the Krigwa players originated. If so, however, why wouldn’t s/he simply say “from Harlem” rather than include “presumably”? The second interesting turn of phrase is that *Aftermath* “appears to be” a folk play. The wording of both of these assumptions implies that the reviewer was thoroughly unimpressed by the production. *Billboard* published the second review, which was even more scathing. It posits that the play is “too confined to a few localities to make it of production value to little theatres.” It also argues the “‘white trash’ theme is too offensive,” and that a play less concerned with race would have been better received: “This group, which took a prize in last year’s tournament, is unfortunate in its play selection this year. The former play was a plausible tale of contemporary negro life, which did not deal with a race problem” (“Scottish” 7). This statement, that suggests “contemporary negro life” has no connection to a “race problem,” seems absurd, but it provides an important illustration of the climate in which Burrill’s play was produced. It was an era when African American musicals such as *Shuffle Along* (1921) incorporated jazzy music and minstrel show tropes to become nation-wide phenomena (Krasner 239). Thus, the reviewer’s statement indicates the dominant culture’s viewpoint that African American drama should be popular entertainment, not social critique.

The criticism the play received for being too concerned with the “race problem” is particularly interesting when one learns that the ending of Burrill’s play was radically altered for production. Rather than ending with John seizing his guns and taking Lonnie to exact revenge,

the *Billboard* review states that John staggers back to the stage and dies melodramatically (“Scottish” 7). Kathy Perkins notes several reasons for the change: “Speculation is that the producers (white) of the tournament feared that using Burrill’s version of the play would cause controversy. The other possibility was that Charles Burroughs, the director, changed the ending to guarantee acceptance in the tournament” (“Strange” 80). Regardless of the reason, the revised ending surely had a major impact on the quality of the production and the subsequent negative reviews. It also had a crushing effect on Burrill herself. In a letter to W.E.B. Du Bois, she writes, “I feel that the ending which the players, without my knowledge or consent, appended to the play was not only an unwarranted violation of the rights of an author, but a serious artistic blunder as well...The ending tacked on by the players changed what might otherwise have been an effective dramatic close into cheap melodramatic claptrap” (Burrill “Letter”). In addition to Burrill’s objections to the revised ending, I would add that having John crawl back onto the stage directs attention away from the play’s main objective: a presentation of a complex African American identity, one that stresses African Americans’ “Americanness” while also highlighting African Americans’ African heritage as an integral part of their American identity.

The play stresses African Americans’ “Americanness,” first, through its presentation of John as an idealized black male body. James links this sort of presentation with a quest for equal citizenship rights (James 16). Furthering James’s argument on this point, I would add that drama, with performance’s emphasis on physicality and the body, is an ideal place to analyze the “perfected body” of the idealized black male and the arguments the play is making about African Americans’ “Americanness.”

For example, in *Aftermath*, John is repeatedly presented as the epitome of black masculinity, with a particular emphasis on his body.⁴⁶ When John first enters the family's cabin after returning from fighting in World War I, the stage directions state, "John is tall and straight—a good soldier and a strong man. He wears the uniform of a private in the American Army...The War Cross is pinned on his breast. On his sleeve three chevrons tell mutely of wounds suffered in the cause of freedom. His brown face is aglow with life and the joy of homecoming" (61). This description illustrates how John's body has become the "idealized representation of the black male soldier-citizen" (James 16). He stands "tall and straight," both markers of masculinity. And even though the stage directions mention his wounds, John's body carries no mark of such trauma; the chevrons on his sleeve that tell of the injuries are "mute," especially in contrast to the gleaming War Cross that serves as a physical reminder of John's heroism and bravery. The play's focus on John's body as an idealized representation of black masculinity continues throughout the play; at one point, other characters actually "form an admiring circle" around John as he stands at attention (64). Using James's theory that this sort of emphasis makes an argument for African Americans' inclusion in the nation, one can see this aspect of *Aftermath* makes a clear argument for African Americans' "Americanness"; John's idealized body can be seen as an implicit argument for African Americans' "fitness" for inclusion in the body politic.

Aftermath shows, however, that this American identity is complex. In addition to presenting John as an idealized black male body, the play also presents a repeated blurring of the

⁴⁶ Will Harris notes that "John is the only male protagonist I've encountered who actually appears on stage in these women's plays [lynching dramas]. He is also the only male character I've come across who occupies the position of primary protagonist by the play's end" (212). Harris's observation is interesting to this study because, in contrast to what he has found with lynching dramas, all of the African American World War I plays have male protagonists on the stage.

boundary between the home front and the warfront, an emphasis that complicates the play's message about African Americans' "Americanness." James's discussion of America as a "war within a war" for African American authors is useful here (9). Through an analysis of the dual war motif in *Aftermath*, one can see that the play does not simply promote African Americans' unflinching loyalty to the nation. Rather, the play points out ways America has become a war zone for minorities, and it can be seen as a "weapon" demanding social change.

The first indication in *Aftermath* that the home front of America has become a brutal war zone comes as soon as the curtain rises. One sees Millie, a teenage girl, and Mam Sue, her grandmother, doing housework in their cabin. It has a "great stone hearth blackened by age" with a Bible resting on it and a "well-scrubbed kitchen table and a substantial wooden chair" (57). These details produce an impression of solid domesticity and family continuity; the items in the cabin signal a family life that is safe and unchanging—both the hearth and the table (and thus the family) have withstood the test of time. This image is shattered, however, when we learn that Millie's father (Mam Sue's son) has been dragged from the home and lynched; according to Millie, "w'ite devuls come in heah an' tuk'n po' dad out and bu'nt him" (58). This news contrasts sharply with the setting of domestic shelter. It shows that the cabin, the family's home, cannot protect them from the war raging in the U.S. According to Millie, her father was lynched because "he got in a row wid ole Mister Withrow 'bout the price of cotton—an he called dad a liar an' struck him—an dad he up an' struck him back" (65). Later that day, the lynch mob entered the house and took the father by force. John's outburst at hearing the news underscores the family's sense of violation: "So they've come into ouah home, have they!" (65). This story predicates John's eventual action; the father, by defending himself, becomes a model of

manhood for his son. Thus, rather than their home being a place of shelter and protection, the cabin has become a site of racial war.

The blurring of boundaries between the home front and the war front continues when the women learn that John, the family's heroic son, is returning from the war. In a strange twist, the war is presented as a place where John feels at home. In her description of John winning a War Cross, Millie exclaims, "n' he's been to Paris, an' the fines' people stopp't him when they seen his medal, an' shook his han' an' smiled at him—an he kin go evahwhere, an' dey ain't nobody all the time a lookin' down on him, an' a-sneerin' at him cause he's black" (59). Millie's story highlights John's sense of equality in France; even the "fines people" greet him and thank him for his service. He also has a sense of freedom there; he can go anywhere he wishes with minimal problems. These aspects of Millie's story contrast starkly with their father's experience and can be seen as a complete reversal of the home front and war front; where John is greeted and thanked by whites in France, the father was disrespected and laughed at by the whites in his town. Where John is free to go wherever he chooses without incident, the father was not free to go anywhere, and was not safe—even in his own home.

The conflation of the home front with the warfront is underscored even more when John learns his father has been lynched. John becomes enraged and explicitly equates America with the warfront. Bitterly he says, "You mean to tell me I mus' let them w'ite devuls send me miles erway to suffer an' be shot up fu' the freedom of people I ain't nevah seen, while they're burnin' an' killin' my folks here at home! To Hell with 'em!" (65-66). John's speech shows that America, with its lynchings and Jim Crow laws, is the war zone, one in which African Americans are burned and killed. It also emphasizes the irony of fighting for others' "freedom" when John and his family have none at home.

The complex blurring of home front and warfront continues in the final image of the play. After John declares he is going to get revenge on the whites who killed his father, Millie begs him to stop: “Oh, John, they’ll kill yuh!” John responds “defiantly,” saying, “Whut ef they do! I ain’t skeered o’ none of em!” He shoves one of his military-issued guns into his younger brother’s hands and says, “Take this, an’ come on here, boy, an’ we’ll see what Withrow an’ his gang have got to say!” (66). John’s words and actions show that the racial and economic war at “home” has boiled over; John is unwilling to let his father’s murder go unpunished and seeks the “justice” he fought for in France and which was denied his father at home. In another strange twist, John must fight for his life (and his family’s lives) on the home front, the place where one would assume he could finally lay down his weapons. In fact, one of John’s first actions upon arriving home is to put his weapons down. The stage directions that end the play also have an ominous tone: “John rushes out of the cabin and disappears in the gathering darkness” (66). This “darkness” could symbolize many things: focusing on the word “gathering,” it could mean an African American collective consciousness, which would further the interpretation of the play as an optimistic call for black solidarity. It could also refer to the “gathering darkness” of a storm cloud, and the ending could be read as less optimistic. This last interpretation is supported by the song John whistles when he first returns to the cabin; the stage directions specify that he whistles “Though the boys are far away, they dream of home” (61). This line comes from the popular World War I song titled “Keep the Home Fires Burning.” The portion that John whistles specifically emphasizes the home front: “Keep the home fires burning, / Though your hearts are yearning, / Though the boys are far away / They dream of home. / There’s a silver lining / Through the dark cloud’s shining. / Turn the dark clouds inside out / Till the boys come home” (Brophy 171). What is ironic here is that there is no “silver lining” in these “dark clouds”; the

play shows that the “home fires” of America have been ones built upon African Americans’ flesh. This reading of John disappearing into the “gathering darkness” highlights the idea that America symbolizes a growing storm; that the “war,” whether one is speaking of World War I’s fight for democracy, or African Americans’ fight for equal citizenship rights, is far from over. Thus, *Aftermath* is not a simplistic call for African Americans to classify themselves as “Americans.” The play also highlights the racial and economic wars present in the nation, and it becomes a “weapon” by “documenting what is in order to suggest what should be” (Schroeder 98).

Thus far, I have analyzed what the play says about African Americans’ identities as Americans. It is also important to note that the play also stresses African heritage through the character of Mam Sue as a link to collective memories of Africa, the middle passage, and slavery. This notion of the black body as a site of memory has garnered much recent scholarship. Hershini Bhana Young, using Roach’s notion of kinesthetic imagination as a reference point, argues that bodily injuries in African American literature “function both actually and metaphorically within the text to give the reader a visceral experience of what it means for this collective body to be injured” (2). Similarly, Carol Henderson seeks to “redirect critical attention to the wounded body and the ways it is used as metaphor within the African American literary imagination” (8). While both scholars acknowledge the individuality of each injured or scarred African American body, they also insist on a collective reading: “black bodies function not only as individuals but also as metonyms for larger historical forces that constitute social bodies” (Young 89). Thus, the black body is redefined as a “*collective*, remembering body. This body then stretches from coast to coast to coast, from South Carolina to the Kongo, from Guadeloupe to Paris, from South Africa to New York, and it is unwieldy, awkward, and continually falling

apart. It is a body that bears the brunt of history, a body in need of redress” (Young 2). These theories of the African American body as a form of collective memory inform my reading of Burrill’s depiction of Mam Sue, adding another layer of depth to *Aftermath*’s presentation of African American identity.

One way Mam Sue can be seen as a “collective, remembering body” is through the play’s depiction of her bones and eyes as receptacles of memory for slavery and the middle passage. For example, Mam Sue’s knees are described as holding all of the sufferings of African Americans’ diasporic past. She repeatedly asks for a bottle of liniment, saying, “dis ole pain done come back in mah knee” (60). On an individual level, the pain Mam Sue feels is probably typical joint stiffness caused by arthritis. On the collective level, the “ole pain” she speaks of is the long-festering wound of the Atlantic slave trade and racist American society: her body metaphorically “bears the brunt of history” (Young 2). It is a history that keeps rearing its head, as Mam Sue makes clear by calling it the “ole” pain and saying that it “done come back.” In this way, her aching knees signify “the social institutions that continue to devalue black people and *rerupture* these wounds through a persistent reworking of the social and political discourses that shape the racial imaginings of the black body” (Henderson 112). Thus, while the root of the collective injury might be in the past, the memory of slavery and the middle passage mingle with the racist practices of 1920s America to make this a *recurring* injury.

The depiction of Mam Sue’s eyes also highlights the theory of the body as a form of memory and Mam Sue as a link to memories of Africa. In the play’s opening stage directions, Mam Sue is described as “very old. Her ebony face is seamed with wrinkles; and in her bleared, watery eyes there is a world-old sorrow” (57). This description fits with what Trudier Harris states in her investigation of lynching dramas: “Unlike what would become stereotyped portraits

of strong, resilient black women by mid-twentieth century, these playwrights depict black women who are in pain, ineffectual, and often unable to hold their families or their own bodies together” (25). Harris argues that the women’s infirm bodies are an ironic mirror of society at large: “the poor condition of the bodies of the elderly black women...reflects the state of ill health of the larger racist American society” (39). I would take this analysis of Mam Sue one step further and suggest that her ailments, seen through theories of the body as memory, highlight her link not just to America’s current state but also its haunting past and its ties to the African continent (it is a “*world-old* sorrow,” not solely a reference to North America). Mam Sue describes herself as almost eighty years old, which means she was born into slavery around 1838. This information helps one interpret the “sorrow” in her eyes. Rather than describe just Mam Sue’s hardships or the sickness of American society, this detail links her to “unthinkable,” “unspeakable” memories of slavery, the middle passage, and forced removal from Africa. The play’s emphasis on Mam Sue’s eyes also has an important tie to African American folklore, a lore scholars argue has direct links to different African cultures. Walter Rucker, in *The River Flows On’: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America*, notes that “folklore...was among the tools that combined disparate elements from a number of African ethnolinguistic groups present in North America and allowed for the formation of a relatively unitary outlook” (13). In particular, the “world-old sorrow” in Mam Sue’s eyes recalls the folk notion of “double sight,” an ability Daryl Cumber Dance, African American folklorist whom John Lowe called the “Dean of Folkculture,” describes as the ability to see beyond the everyday, such as “the ability to see ghosts” (Dance 554). Mam Sue’s eyes take on this “double sight” by reflecting not just the present but also the painful “ghosts” of African and American history.

One other detail about Mam Sue’s eyes characterizes her as a link to collective African memories. In her first conversation with Millie, Mam Sue “reads” the logs in their fire: “A

burning log falls apart, and Mam Sue suddenly stops singing and gazes intently at the fire. She speaks in deep mysterious tones to Millie,” “See dat log dah, Millie? De one fallin’ tuh de side dah wid de big flame lappin’ round hit? Dat means big doin’s round heah tonight!” (57). Mam Sue’s prophesy comes true—there are “big doin’s” when John comes home. Mam Sue also correctly prophesied that something evil was going to happen the night the father was lynched. This instance of Mam Sue “reading” the fire is a long-documented practice in studies of African American folklore. For instance, an 1888 *Cosmopolitan* article “Superstitions of the Negro” by white ethnographer Eli Shepard details similar occurrences: “Young girls sitting meditatively before the wood-fire of an evening may form some idea as to who will bear them company; if a log should roll down from the blazing heap, a tall man will be the visitor; if a short log roll down, a ‘short statured’ man will call” (251). Lawrence Levine writes that this sort of divination was a common part of black folk culture: “Nature...provided signs that correctly read could help one avoid or, at the very least, be prepared for a host of calamities or disasters” (66). Moreover, Levine argues that these “readings” have a direct connection to African American’s African heritage: “the ethos prevailing in the African cultures from which the slaves came would have had little use for concepts of the absurd. Life was not random or accidental or haphazard. Events were meaningful; they had causes Man could divine, understand, and profit from” (58). This African influence on African American folk practices links Mam Sue’s prophesy to the depiction of her body as a receptacle of memory, and complicates the play’s presentation of African American identities.

In a seemingly incongruous move, however, Mam Sue’s next lines attribute her powers of divination to a Christian God. She says, “De good Lawd sen’ me dese warnin’s in dis fiah, jes lak He sen’ His messiges in de fiah to Moses” (58). Her statement doesn’t necessarily negate her

role as a link to African memories, however. The combination of formal Christianity and folk beliefs (with their important threads to African cultures) was common for North American slaves and their descendents: “the various components of their religion [formal and folk] complemented and reinforced each other...If the Scriptures could be used to validate sacred folk beliefs, the latter could be helpful in making Christian beliefs more vivid and immediate” (Levine 57). Thus, Mam Sue’s reference to Moses exemplifies this interconnected web between Christianity and African-influenced folk beliefs in African American culture.

This depiction is historically accurate, according to Rucker: “The African backgrounds of the enslaved populations were fundamental—if not absolutely essential—to their identity, culture, and consciousness. African- and American-born slaves were neither *tabula rasas* nor victims of a collective spiritual holocaust. Instead, they crafted a dynamic and functional culture, despite the denial of their humanity and severe limitations on their freedom” (151). Thus, the play’s emphasis on Mam Sue as a person whose body contains the memories of the African diaspora and whose prophecies hint at a link to her severed African past, complicates *Aftermath’s* depiction of African American national identities. Rather than solely emphasize African Americans’ “Americanness” or their “Africanness,” the play presents a multi-layered fusion of American and African as the basis of African American identity.

Ultimately, the title *Aftermath* refers to many things. Most obviously, it refers to the aftermath of World War I with black soldiers coming home. Because of the play’s emphasis on America as a war zone for African Americans and its presentation of Mam Sue’s body as a form of memory, however, the title also refers to the continued “aftermath” of memories of lynching, slavery, and the middle passage. Thus, its presentation of African American national identity is a complex one; the play argues for African Americans’ “Americanness” at the same time as it

subtly reminds one of lingering memories of Africa. In this way, *Aftermath* joins Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen* in bringing complexity to the issue of African Americans serving in the Great War. Both argue that the "war"—ostensibly World War I's fight for democracy, but also African Americans' struggle for full citizenship rights—is far from over, and they question whether African American military service might assist in the ongoing struggle for equal rights.

Chapter Two

“A seething world is gone stark mad”: Staging No-Man’s-Land

The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future.

Arthur A. Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Past”

While Dunbar-Nelson and Burrill focused on the impact of the Great War on the home front, two male playwrights explored the “theatre of war.” Joseph Cotter, Jr.’s *On the Fields of France* (1920) and S. Randolph Edmonds’s *Everyman’s Land* (1930) are the only African American World War I plays set in a combat zone. While the texts stand out among African American Great War drama, they follow a long tradition of “front line” plays in European and American theatre. For example, Heinz Kosok counts more than thirty such plays in British and Irish drama alone. The plays, he writes, “usually rely on their authors’ personal experience, [and they] do not deal with the war as such but with specific events, seen from the perspective of a few dramatis personae with clearly developed character traits” (Kosok 17). Almost exclusively focused on trench warfare (due to the public’s “fixation” on it), the majority of the plays are set in northern France and feature German enemies (Kosok 17-19). In contrast, mainstream American drama was slow to dramatize actual combat on the stage. Ronald Wainscott, author of the most thorough investigation of Euro-American World War I drama, notes that while there were at least 112 Great War plays staged on Broadway, almost all dealt with soldiers’ homecomings, and often they were “comic or sentimentally melodramatic” (8). These traits seem to emphasize the average American’s desire for escapism and the nation’s distance from the actual war. The exception to this rule was *What Price Glory* (1924), by Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings. The play dramatizes a combat zone in France, and Wainscott calls it “antiheroic” and “cynical” (33). In America, it was “the first honest attempt to recapture the

confusion, arbitrariness, and senselessness of the Great War, known almost exclusively by the combatants” (Wainscott 35). Thus, *What Price Glory* was unique in mainstream American World War I drama, but it paved the way for combat to be featured more graphically in plays about future American wars.

Cotter’s and Edmonds’s plays interact with these trends in several ways. In terms of the European model, both are set on a battlefield in northern France and both explicitly reference German attacks. Neither man, however, wrote from personal experience: few African American troops saw combat in the Great War, and of the forty thousand that did,⁴⁷ none apparently penned plays about their experiences. The African American “front line” plays also diverge from the European model in their characterization. Both Cotter and Edmonds use shallow, undeveloped characters: their focus is propaganda, not character development. Cotter’s and Edmonds’s plays also differ from the American model of the front line play. Where *What Price Glory* presents cynicism and undermines heroism, *On the Fields of France* and *Everyman’s Land* present African American troops as clear-cut heroes and provide optimism about the future.

In order to understand the vast differences between Cotter’s and Edmonds’s plays and the European and Euro-American warfront drama, it is imperative to delve into the conversation in which both authors were engaging about African American citizenship rights. A sampling of major United States publications (both African American and white) of the 1920s indicates that the “front line” in the fight for full African American citizenship rights in the decade centered on Jim Crow laws and segregation. For instance, a 1927 *Chicago Defender* editorial discusses the Dred Scott decision, the 1857 Supreme Court ruling that people of African descent transported to

⁴⁷ Of the 200,000 African American soldiers deployed to France in World War I, 160,000 served as laborers. The forty thousand that were combat troops served with the Ninety-second and Ninety-third Infantry Divisions (Lanning 133).

the United States and held as slaves (or their descendents) were not, and could never be, citizens. The editorial argues that, while the ruling was overturned with the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1866, it lives on in the form of “‘Jim Crowism,’ lynching, burning, disfranchisement, concubinage and peonage, and all forms of discrimination and segregation” (“Renew” 1). The publications of the decade document a strong effort to overturn such discrimination, including a 1923 effort to repeal prohibition if the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were not going to be upheld (“Sanctity”), several 1924 appeals to the Republican party to stand up for its loyal black members (“Our Last”), and a 1926 campaign to raise \$1,000,000 to combat segregation (“To Fight”). These efforts were not ultimately successful. The decade saw a string of Supreme Court rulings (such as the 1920 ruling to uphold Jim Crow laws) that denied African Americans equal footing as citizens of the United States (“Extra”). If one is aware of these contexts, even though *On the Fields of France* and *Everyman’s Land* are set on European soil, the American issues of Jim Crow laws and segregation, so hotly debated in the 1920s, take center stage.

Also paramount in the differences between Cotter’s and Edmonds’s plays and mainstream “front line” drama is their engagement with the widespread critique of African American soldiers’ and officers’ participation in World War I. The belief that African American troops had proved themselves incompetent by their performances in the Great War was widespread, but seemed to be based on the actions of one regiment, the 368th of the 92nd Division. Whalan writes that the division, “marked with the stigma of failure,” was “composed of black draftees and was officered up to company rank by Des Moines graduates” (7). The latter fact put much at stake: Fort Des Moines was the only training camp for black officers during World War

I. Thus, Des Moines graduates' conduct in the war was seen as a litmus test for African Americans' suitability as officers.

The 368th Regiment's decisive battle came in the Argonne Forest in September of 1918:

It was here that the 368th Regiment was sent over the top, without being equipped with rifle grenades, instruments that were absolutely necessary for use in the destruction of German machine-gun nests. Very few of the officers and none of the enlisted men had ever seen such a grenade, and the absence of this weapon in warfare, where guns alone were practically useless, caused a retreat which resulted in several of the colored officers being arrested and sent to prison for cowardice. (Hunton 58)⁴⁸

The regiment's scattered retreat "became characterized as a terrified rout, allegedly due to poor leadership from black officers and inherent racial characteristics that made black men ill-fitted for military service" (Whalan 8). This judgment, that the regiment's inadequate performance proved African Americans were genetically inferior, was clearly motivated by racial prejudice; it did not take into account, for example, that "from the outset there was concern that the soldiers had received insufficient training...[and] it had not been equipped with wire-cutters, maps, signal flares, or grenade launchers, and it received only intermittent artillery support from French units" (Whalan 7-8). In fact, one of the officers of the 92nd, William N. Colson, would argue well after the war that the division's collapse in the Argonne was premeditated "for the avowed purpose of demonstrating a failure" (qtd. in Whalan 9). While Colson does not specify who he feels set the division up to fail, it seems implied that he faults the American military for sending the regiment into battle with less-than adequate training and supplies as a way to prove African Americans'

⁴⁸ For a thorough description of the battle, see Barbeau and Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: Black American Troops in World War I*, pgs. 150-152.

“natural” inferiority. This sentiment was echoed by Addie W. Hunton and Kathryn M. Johnson, two of the few African American women allowed to participate in the war effort overseas.⁴⁹ They called the decision to send the relatively untrained, ill-equipped 368th into battle a “pre-arranged and infamous plan to discredit colored officers on the battlefields” (50).

This “infamous plan” worked; the reports of African American combat soldiers and officers became codified in military history. White commanding officers labeled the entire division a failure and included racist remarks in their condemnation of African American soldiers. For example, Colonel Greer stated, “They failed in all their missions, laid down and sneaked to the rear, until they were withdrawn” (qtd. in Barbeau 153). His terms “laid down” and “sneaked” reinforce the minstrel images of African Americans as irresponsible cowards, no more reliable than slinking dogs. Similarly, Colonel Fred Brown, commanding officer of the 368th, wrote a paper titled “The Inefficiency of Negro Officers,” where he upheld reports that African American soldiers were deficient: “No colored officer or non-commissioned officer exercised any command at the time and could not be distinguished from the enlisted men. I wish to go on record as expressing my opinion that colored officers as a class are unfit to command troops in present day warfare” (qtd. in Barbeau 153-54). His conclusion that African Americans are unsuitable for “present day” conflicts seems to indicate a racist association of African Americans with the primitive, and argues that African Americans are unfit for the “modern” warfare of more “civilized” races.

⁴⁹ Hunton and Johnson worked for fifteen months spanning 1918-1919 with the YMCA in France. They supported the needs of African American servicemen, such as writing letters for them, teaching them to read, creating libraries, and providing “guidance and mature companionship for young soldiers far from home who had few other comforts in their lives” (Alexander xxi). Out of their experiences they wrote *Two Colored Women with the American Expeditionary Forces*, the only African American female-authored text to report first-hand accounts of the war (Alexander xvii).

Such denigration of the 368th, and by association all African American officers and troops, had far-reaching consequences. Whalan notes that “these rumors spread throughout the U.S. Army, and the poor performance of this one regiment became reported instead as a failure of the whole division” (8). Barbeau and Henri’s account of the regiment’s history supports this conclusion: “for at least thirty years to come...[it would] be pointed to as proof of the inadequacy of black soldiers and black officers and would prevent their rise in the army” (150). Thus, despite the regiment’s lack of training and equipment, and despite other African American divisions being hailed as heroes in combat (the 369th for example), the 368th Regiment’s failure was pointed to for some time as proof that U.S. military policy should continue to exclude African Americans from offices of power. And those in charge of the armed forces listened: after World War I less than six black officers were retained in the army, and in the 1930s “the number of blacks in the U.S. Army and their degree of equality continued to diminish.” Once again, African American troops were given maintenance and support jobs (Lanning 155). By the late 1930s “less than four thousand African Americans were on active duty, fewer than had been in the ranks prior to World War I” (Lanning 157). Other branches of the military offered even less opportunity: the Marine Corps excluded African Americans and the Navy accepted few black volunteers and relegated them to “servant and laborer positions” (Lanning 158). Thus, the negative historical accounts of African American officers and combat troops in the Great War helped reinforce Jim Crow policies in the military for decades after the conflict, policies that would not be overturned until the end of World War II.

It was not just military history, however, that denigrated the African American soldier; American popular culture also took up the theme. For example, there are several known minstrel

skits and stories that support the image of African American troops as incompetent buffoons.⁵⁰ These minstrel images speak directly to American racial anxieties immediately following the Great War. In order to muster support for the war effort, the “Americanness” (associated with “whiteness”) of recent immigrants to the United States had been emphasized: “The much-remarked-upon elasticity of whiteness, a privileged identity that could expand and contract according to historical and economic expediency, had at least in part broadened during the war years to appeal to America’s ethnically diverse community to band together for the struggle” (Whalan 32). This “broadening” did not extend to African Americans: “likeness to the Negro (or the Indian) was the sign that native-born Americans always used to declare a new immigrant group beyond the pale of equal citizenship” (Slotkin 110). Yet, the very “elasticity of whiteness” that the Great War highlighted indicated that race was a social construct. That troubling notion, as well as the fact that some African Americans had trained as combat troops, had been given weapons, and were perhaps returning home with a renewed sense of militancy, caused anxiety in the dominant culture that needed some sort of a “safety valve” (Whalan 33).

On the stage, this release was found in black face portrayals of the African American troops. Eric Lott, in his iconic exploration of minstrelsy’s origins, argues “the primary purpose of early black face performance was to display the ‘black’ male body, to fetishize it in a spectacle... ‘Black’ figures were there *to be looked at*, shaped to the demands of desire; they were screens on which audience fantasy could rest, securing white spectators’ position as superior, controlling, not to say owning, figures” (original emphasis 28). Thus, the minstrel portrayals of African

⁵⁰ Whalan notes that “in the white press and publishing industry, a small sub-genre of war-related minstrel fiction and play scripts developed that thrived on placing stock black minstrel characters in wartime situations” (33). He lists as examples Wade Stratton’s *Memphis Mose of the AEF*, Jack Dionne’s *Cullud Fun*, C.L. Majors’s *World War Jokes*, and Charles E. Mack’s *Two Black Crows in the A.E.F.* These range from minstrel skits to short fiction to a novel.

American soldiers as buffoons with little brains and even less bravery serve as projections for white American fantasies. The minstrel images assuaged the fear of images of militant, masculine African American soldiers, and instead put the white spectators back in the “controlling” position of power.

Wade Stratton’s *A Burnt Cork Barrage: Minstrel Material with a Military Flavor* is a case in point. This 1921 minstrel script, meant for “The ‘Vets’ to Use in Their Shows,”⁵¹ conforms to the standard format of minstrel plays,⁵² but its focus on the military service of African Americans sets it apart from the typical plantation and dandy fare. Throughout the text, African American soldiers are depicted as lazy, unintelligent, and cowardly. In a skit titled “Believe it or not, but-,” the interlocutor questions one endman who plays a black veteran of the Great War. He states, “I just learned today that you are a hero of the world war... Suppose you relate something of your exploits. I suppose you did your share?” The endman replies, “I sure did. I remember one day I cut off the feet of two thousand of the enemy.” “The feet of two thousand of the enemy? Why didn’t you cut off their heads?” questions the interlocutor. The endman provides the punch line: “Somebody else did that before I got there” (Stratton 4). The skit presents the African American soldier as a tale-teller, one who boasts about giving the

⁵¹ This description highlights a variant of the traveling minstrel shows, the amateur production: “As the new century progressed, for 10, 25, or 50 cents, more and more guidebooks, skits, and music became available. Small-town minstrelsy became ubiquitous” (Hatch 134).

⁵² The standard format for minstrel shows (although there were many variants, including African Americans in blackface) included a semicircle of three white men, “their faces painted black, their eyes and mouths outlined in white, red, or both.” In the center of the semicircle sat “Mr. Interlocutor,” often white (not in blackface), who served as master of the ceremonies and played the straight man to the others’ antics. On either side of the Interlocutor sat the endmen, “costumed theatrically as plantation ‘darkies.’” Each was named for the instrument he played: “Tambo” with a tambourine, “Bones” with the “rhythm-clacking ribs.” The minstrel show had three parts: part one “might feature a jig... followed by a sentimental ballad, all interspersed with ... riddles and jokes.” Part two was called the “olio,” and it continued the riddles and jokes but also added a stump speech. The last section was comprised of a one-act play (Hatch 94-95).

impression that he “did his share,” but (as is common in minstrel portrayals) who always gets it wrong. The fact that he is referred to as a “hero of the world war” is intended to ridicule his participation; the skit shows that “African American” and “hero” are antithetical, and thus an underlying meaning of the skit’s title is brought to light: the skit argues that one should *not* “believe” the tales of African American heroism during the war.

A similar structure is used for the short joke “Heavy Shooting.” Here, the interlocutor asks an endman, “Why are you so deep in thought?” The endman replies, “I was just thinking of the shooting that was going on once in front of the guard-house.” “Shooting?...What happened?” The endman answers, “I had just laid down a twenty-franc note when some ornery cuss shoots a seven” (Stratton 6). The joke, centering on different meanings of the word “shooting,” depicts the African American man as a lazy gambler rather than an authentic soldier (in this case, seemingly defined as one who fires a gun and is fired at). In fact, the speaker is not even the one who “shoots”; he simply loses his money. The joke cuts to the heart of Lott’s explanation of minstrelsy’s purpose; if black face performances were meant to reinforce white spectators’ feelings of power, it is fitting that the African American soldier would “shoot” craps rather than a rifle. If, as the minstrel images argued, cutting off dead men’s feet and gambling were the only activities of black soldiers, whites in the United States had little to fear.

The African American community responded with vigor to counter these negative images propagated by both the minstrel stage and military historians. The effort to record a balanced account of African American service in combat was led by amateur historians such as Hunton and Johnson and Emmett J. Scott. Creative artists also heeded the call. Three short stories, one play (Cotter’s), and two novels published in the *Crisis* from 1920-1924 focus on the war zone. The novels include Jessie Fauset’s *There is Confusion*; Victor Daly’s *Not Only War* and short

stories “Private Walker Goes Patrolling” and “Goats, Wildcats and Buffalo”; and Florence Bentley’s 1921 short story “Two Americans” (Whalan 71, James 183).⁵³ The last is an excellent example of the style and content of African American front-line fiction. In the story, a young man enlists in the army even though his brother has just been lynched. He is sent to France and is mortally wounded in no-man’s-land. As he clings to life, he is confronted by his brother’s murderer, who is also an American soldier. The white soldier abandons him, but in a moment of high drama, the ghost of the lynched brother appears to tell the white soldier that the wounded man is his “brother.” Inspired by this vision, the white soldier rescues the young man but eventually both die—not before, however, the white soldier has revealed his transformation from bigoted murderer to repentant fellow citizen. The story ends with both men buried in anonymous, side-by-side plots, marked only as “Two Americans” (Bentley 202-205). Bentley’s story provides the general outline for all of the African American front-line fiction: it has two soldier protagonists, one black and one white, and it has them dying together, most typically after the white soldier has sworn off his racist past. Thus, African American fiction dealing with no-man’s-land typically strives to recuperate the history of African American service and sacrifice in the Great War to give hope that change on the home front is possible.

The plays by Joseph S. Cotter, Jr. and S. Randolph Edmonds are a direct response to the widespread denigration of African American officers and soldiers after the war. Cotter’s *On the Fields of France* (1920) and Edmonds’s *Everyman’s Land* (1930) present a seemingly idealistic union between a heroic black soldier and a white soldier in the behavioral vortex of no-man’s-land. Although no-man’s-land was literally the margin of ground between the trenches, littered

⁵³ It is important to note that I have restricted this list to African American literature that deals explicitly with the front line; there are many other texts (such as Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula* or Rudolph Fischer’s short stories “High Yaller” and “The City of Refuge”) that present African American Great War veterans.

with barbed wire and bodies, in African American writing about World War I there is also a tradition of presenting it as a positive space where racism can be overturned. It typically was presented as:

a desegregated space that was strangely liberating, one in which identity was stripped down to the most basic, corporeal level and simple survival overrode superstructural social codes and etiquette...Although all of these writers recognized that this was a potentially lethal terrain, many saw battle as prompting the most thoroughgoing changes that servicemen, black or white, would undergo in France, changes that had profound consequences for American racial politics. (Whalan 48-49)⁵⁴

These plays exemplify the “liberating” potential of no-man’s-land and show African American writers recuperating their images from racist historiography and minstrelsy. Their purpose is to counteract the denigration of African American troops by (re)constructing the historical accounts

⁵⁴ This view of no-man’s-land corresponds to a more general notion of France as a land of freedom and true democracy, a belief that was not limited to African American writers, although Fabre notes that many of the major writers of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Hughes, Fauset, McKay, Toomer, and Cullen, visited or lived in Paris at the time (3). Also sharing this view were the African American soldiers who experienced relatively little racism in their dealings with the French; the soldiers spread this idealized image of France to the “Negro masses” (Fabre 47). Prominent African American performers, such as Josephine Baker, and other musicians and artists, such as Palmer Hayden, Hale Woodruff, Augusta Savage, and Elizabeth Prophet, were also drawn to France (Fabre 3). Whalan notes that African American leaders were not blind to the fact that underneath France’s apparent racial equality lay its colonial practices in Africa. Yet, the idealization of France had strategic importance: “the shift to lauding French democracy was a necessary tactical move to maintain the pressure for reform in the United States,” Whalan argues (51). The view of France as the true democracy also had an impact long after World War I; it paved the way for major African American artists and performers to visit and live in France later in the twentieth century. One must also note that the African American idealization of France and the resulting expatriate community it encouraged was not isolated; it tied into the general American idealization of France (seen most plainly in Edith Wharton’s *French Ways and Their Meaning*) and the formation of the white expatriate “lost generation” community living in Paris after the war.

of the war, effectively waging a battle to control the construction of history. By documenting a positive history of African American bravery and service, the plays attempt to “recoup this pivotal moment in the historical narrative of the twentieth-century West to their advantage, however limited that advantage might be” (Whalan 49). Thus, Cotter’s and Edmonds’s plays are similar to Dunbar-Nelson’s and Burrill’s quests for full African American inclusion in the nation, but these later plays are engaging in a different context. Cotter and Edmonds must (re)construct, out of the “liberating” space of no-man’s-land, a positive account of African American service in the Great War in order to carve out a space for full African American citizenship rights after the conflict.

Cotter’s *On the Fields of France*

An investigation of Cotter’s *On the Fields of France* cannot be complete without an understanding of the playwright’s short, brilliant life. Although he died at age 23 on February 3, 1919, Cotter, Jr.’s life is well documented, thanks in large part to his father, Joseph Cotter, Sr.⁵⁵ Cotter, Sr. was himself a published author, but was better known for his service as a principal at several Louisville, Kentucky high schools (Shockley 332). This position was not easy to obtain, however; Cotter, Sr. had to drop out of school at age eight, worked jobs as a manual laborer, and educated himself through night school classes. He was “a self-made man who drew himself out of the quagmire of poverty and illiteracy,” and “he became a paragon for the children in his school” (Shockley 333). Cotter, Jr.’s mother, Maria Cox Cotter, was also an educator; she was

⁵⁵ After Cotter Jr.’s death, Cotter Sr. memorialized his son with the unpublished “Joseph S. Cotter, Jr.” The short (one page) biography is available through the Cotter Papers at the Louisville Free Public Library (LFPL). An abbreviated version seems to have been used as the basis of the Cotter, Jr. biography in Countee Cullen’s *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets* (99-100).

“an educated woman from a respectable family” who “had taught in public schools and once served as principal” (Shockley 336). The family’s emphasis on the transformative powers of education definitely influenced their son; Sr. reports, “before he entered school at the age of six years he had read about thirty books—these included all the readers in the elementary schools 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8th grades and part of the Bible” (Cotter, Sr. archive account). In high school Jr. studied the “very traditional curriculum of Latin, English, history, mathematics, and science,” and he graduated second in his class at Louisville Central High School in 1911 at the age of 15 (Payne 2-3). The next year, Cotter enrolled at Fisk University in Nashville where his older sister, Florence, attended.

During his sophomore year he contracted tuberculosis (a significant cause of death in the African American community at the time) and had to return home (Payne 3). Florence died from the same disease a year later, on December 16, 1914 (Payne 3). Cotter, Sr. writes that “it was grieving over his sister’s death that discovered to him [Cotter, Jr.] his poetic talent” (Cotter, Sr. archive). Perhaps spurred by this interest in creative writing, Cotter became an editor at the Louisville *Leader*, the foremost African American newspaper in the city, when he returned to Louisville. He also wrote and published a significant amount of poetry before his life was cut short by the disease that had taken his sister.

Although *On the Fields of France* was Cotter’s only play, he was a prolific journalist and poet, and his editorials and poems help illuminate the seemingly anomalous “front line” play. His work in journalism began in 1917 in a paper launched that year by Willis Cole, and, “like most successful black newspaper editors of his day, Cole strongly protested discrimination, constantly informing his readers of insults blacks received when patronizing white businesses and urging blacks to boycott white establishments whenever possible” (Wright 199). The *Leader* carried the

motto: “It is your newspaper—militant but stable” (microfilm from U Kentucky—intro. material on reel 1). This emphasis on African American pride, activism, and community seemed to suit Cotter. Very few of his editorials survive,⁵⁶ but in the extant pieces Cotter addresses topics as varied as racism in Louisville to the conditions of African American soldiers and the effect of the Great War on African colonies. All editorials, however, are permeated with a sense of activism. For example, in an undated editorial titled “Why We Should Fight for Our Rights,” Cotter exclaims,

We should fight for our rights, first of all because the time is ripe. As soon as any right is denied or abridged then is the time eminently ripe for the beginning of a fight to have such disabilities removed...We must fight for our rights, secondly, because if we do not no one else will. We are the people who are sinned against, and consequently we are the people be [sic] first in the fight...So, after all, this is why we must fight for our rights; why we must agitate and organize; to keep ever present in the mind and soul of every Negro that these conditions are abnormal and not natural; to let every colored person know that ‘jim-crowism,’ segregation and disenfranchisement are but children of men’s hate and not the predestined due of any people. (Cotter Papers LFPL)

In this call to arms, Cotter urges African Americans to “organize” and fight, both on the front of government policy (regarding “jim-crowism” and “segregation”) and on the front of African American identity (nurturing the “mind and soul” of all African Americans to help them see

⁵⁶ Few *Leader* issues from Cotter’s lifetime are extant. The Cotter archive at the LFPL has six editorials that appear to have been cut out of the newspaper. Issues of the *Leader* have been copied onto microfilm (available from the University of Kentucky), but unfortunately little of Cotter’s work has been preserved; there are no extant issues for 1918 or 1919, and only the November 10 issue survives for 1917.

racism is not “natural”). Although the editorial has no date, Cotter’s activist message is echoed in the African American newspapers and periodicals of the time (1918 and 1919). The most famous can be heard in Du Bois’s “Returning Soldiers,” but others include James Weldon Johnson’s editorials in the *New York Age* and essays in more radical socialist publications such as the *Messenger* and the *Crusader*.⁵⁷ All of these publications, Cotter’s work at the *Louisville Leader* included, rallied African Americans back to the “fight” for citizenship rights on the home front.

The same sort of activist spirit permeates Cotter’s poetry, the genre of writing for which he is most famous, specifically his war poetry.⁵⁸ While James Robert Payne notes that Cotter was not limited solely to war themes in his writing, an investigation of his war poetry seems particularly pertinent to this project; furthermore, Payne argues that Cotter is “unquestionably among the finest of the Afro-American poets of the Great War” (11). Cotter has four poems typically classified as war poems: “O, Little David, Play on your Harp,” “The Band of Gideon,” “Sonnet to Negro Soldiers,” and “Moloch.” In each, Cotter links the Great War to the fight for citizenship rights at home.

For example, in “O, Little David,” after a pious opening refrain about David playing the harp in anticipation of “the Coming Christ Immanuel,” Cotter gives a stark list of the horrors of

⁵⁷ For example, in “The Battle Begins,” published on November 15, 1918 (four days after the armistice was signed), Johnson exhorts African Americans to “proclaim and insist upon the aims and ideals of America in the war,” and frames this activism as a “battle” (4).

⁵⁸ Contemporary critics as well as twentieth-century scholars see Cotter as an important poet. W.E.B. Du Bois published Cotter’s “Sonnet to Negro Soldiers” in the June 1918 *Crisis*, Countee Cullen included Cotter’s poetry in his 1927 anthology *Caroling Dusk*, and critic William Stanley Braithwaite, in his essay for *The New Negro*, included Cotter in the list of Harlem Renaissance poets who began “a new literary generation...poetry that is racial in substance, but with the universal note, with the conscious background of the full heritage of English poetry” (38). More recently, Eugene B. Redmond has argued that Cotter’s early death “cut short the work of one of the most promising figures in Afro-American poetry,” (168) and James Hatch and Leo Hamalian cite Cotter’s “innovative poetry” and lament that his early death “deprived the Harlem Renaissance of fully enjoying his unique voice” (21).

modern warfare: “A seething world is gone stark mad; / And is drunk with the blood, / Gorged with the flesh, / Blinded with the ashes / Of her millions of dead” (Payne 38). Cotter’s imagery of a bloodthirsty, flesh-eating society links him to other Great War writers who painted the violence and destruction of modern warfare and society in similar terms. Yet, read in conjunction with the rest of the poem, these lines also reference racial violence in the United States; America can be seen as “Gorged with the flesh” of African American bodies. Cotter ends the stanza by explicitly equating the violence in Europe to racial violence in the United States:

Beneath the Crescent
 Lie a people maimed;
 Their only sin—
 That they worship God.
 On Russia’s steppes
 Is a race in tears;
 Their one offense—
 That they would be themselves.
 On Flanders’ plains
 Is a nation raped;
 A bleeding gift
 Of ‘Kultur’s’ conquering creed.
 And in every land
 Are black folk scourged;
 Their only crime—
 That they dare be men.

In this section, Cotter “places the crisis in America precisely parallel to the crisis of Armenian Christians ravaged by Turks, of Russian Jews subjected to Tsarist pogroms, and of the Belgians suffering under the Kaiser’s occupation” (Payne 9). By doing so, he joins a large chorus of African American newspaper writers who drew the same comparison.⁵⁹ Yet the poem also states that Germany has “raped” Belgium, inadvertently reinforcing the racialized nature of America’s war propaganda. In fact, as Whalan makes clear, the German enemy was routinely associated with rape and depicted as apes and monkeys, “tropes that had long been used in connection with African Americans to suggest their racial inferiority” (29). The makers of United States propaganda borrowed images from racist stereotypes with which the American public would be familiar, but the propaganda put those images to another use: to demonize the Germans. This attitude can be seen, for example, in the U.S. recruiting poster *Destroy This Mad Brute* (see Appendix A). It features a menacing black ape wearing a German helmet and holding in its hands a white woman and a club with “Kultur” written on it (Whalan 30-31). The use of “Kultur,” the German word for culture, is significant here, as it is in Cotter’s poem “O, Little David.” For propaganda purposes, the term was used to ridicule “German pretensions to *cultural* superiority” (Kosok 169), a feeling of superiority that, in part, drove Germany into the Great War. The fact that the term was used in a variety of popular media, from plays (Kosok 169) to movies (DeBauche 141), signals an effort on the part of Allied propaganda to demonize the Germans with their own sense of superiority. Thus, even while Cotter highlights the parallels between the atrocities of the Great War and the brutality of racist violence in America, his choice to echo racist anti-German propaganda reinforces the notion that to be “American” is to be “white,” while everyone else is the dangerous, dark enemy.

⁵⁹ See Ellis 39-40.

Despite this complicity with the racism of Allied propaganda, Cotter's poetry also strikes a militant, activist chord. In "The Band of Gideon," for example, Cotter uses biblical imagery in the African American tradition of "signifyin(g)," or "repetition with a signal difference" (Gates xxvi). The poem depicts the followers of Gideon ("Destroyer" or "Mighty Warrior") who, in the book of Judges, Chapters 6-8, led the Israelites in a successful revolt against the Midianites. After the war, however, the group "had to face rejection from coreligionists who insultingly denied Gideon's normal request for cooperation and assistance upon his return from battle" (Payne 7). Cotter's poem depicts the "holy wrath" of Gideon's men in reaction to this rejection:

The band of Gideon yet will come

And strike their tongues of blasphemy dumb.

Each black cloud

Is a fiery steed.

And they cry aloud

With each strong deed,

'The sword of the Lord and Gideon.' (Payne 26)

While the poem on one level retells what would have been a familiar biblical story in Cotter's community, it "signifies" by using the biblical as a metaphor for current secular and political issues, a familiar trope in African American cultural production. Just as Gideon's band faced rejection after their battle, so did African American soldiers return to a United States permeated with segregation and Jim Crow laws. This extended metaphor ends in a militant warning: the band (African Americans) "yet will come" to seek violent revenge. This final stanza, according to Payne, "recalls Gideon's righteous, punishing anger" that "in effect serves as a prophecy for

what may come to the unjust of Cotter's own land" (7). Thus, through the "double-voiced text" (Gates xxv), the poem warns of brewing African American militancy.

With this emphasis on activism in both his poetry and newspaper writing, Cotter's Great War play, *On the Fields of France*, is rather surprising. At first glance, the play seems to be a simplistic, accommodationist apology for the U.S. government and its practices. Set on a battlefield in northern France, the play opens onto a scene of carnage; two American officers lie wounded in no-man's-land, the unoccupied ground between the two trenches that was the scene of intense fighting and large-scale death. The dramatic tension comes from the race of the officers: one is white, the other is black. Each crawls toward the other and, despite acknowledged racial conflicts at home, a bond quickly emerges. They share water, then while holding hands, discuss African Americans' feelings about serving in the Great War. Nearing death, each officer sees figures of American greatness, white and black, floating in the sky: George Washington, Crispus Attucks, Robert E. Lee, William Carney, and Robert Gould Shaw. After one last regret that this bond of mutual understanding wasn't made before the war, the white officer prophesies that America will some day be *one* country, a country for all of its citizens. United, the officers cry "America!" and slump in death, still hand in hand.

This idealized ending, in particular, seems a far cry from Cotter's editorials and poetry calling for African American activism and militancy. Perhaps because of its seemingly simplistic message, its brevity (it took one page to print the entire play in *The Crisis*), or its never having been produced, scholarship about *On the Fields of France* is underdeveloped. No articles are devoted to the play, and, with the exception of Mark Whalan's analysis of its depiction of no-man's-land (71-73), references to *On the Fields of France* are plot descriptions that emphasize

the play's over-the-top endorsement of American policies, specifically of supporting the war.⁶⁰

While the play clearly has a utopian framework, in the context of the widespread denigration of African American soldiers (and officers in particular), this portrayal makes sense. In *On the Fields of France* Cotter participates in the effort to (re)construct positive accounts of African Americans in combat to expand African American citizenship rights on the home front.

The first indication that the play does more than prop up existing U.S. prejudices and policies is its publication history. *On the Fields of France* was published posthumously in June 1920 in *The Crisis*.⁶¹ The journal had undergone marked changes since Alice Dunbar-Nelson published her play there in 1918. At that time, Du Bois had penned the "Close Ranks" editorial, urging African Americans to put aside racial concerns and first deal with the loyalty they owed their country. After the war, however, there was a major shift in Du Bois's thinking: "By the time the Armistice was reached in 1919, Du Bois had become angry over the United States [government's] 'contemptible nastiness' toward African Americans" (James 182). The "nastiness" Du Bois refers to is based on several things: African Americans' unequal treatment during the war, the poor reception of demobilized African American soldiers back at "home," and the apparent total lack of racial progress that African Americans' service in the Great War had achieved. An event that highlighted all of these concerns was the Red Summer of 1919, "so

⁶⁰ It is mentioned in: Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*; Krasner, "Negro Drama and the Harlem Renaissance" *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, 62; Payne, "Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr." *Afro-American Writers Before the Harlem Renaissance* 70-73; Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*, 49; Whalan, "'The Only Real White Democracy' and the Language of Liberation: The Great War, France, and African American Culture in the 1920s," 795. The play is anthologized in: Hatch and Hamalian, *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance 1920-1940*; and Patton and Honey, *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*.

⁶¹ It is likely that Cotter's father submitted the play for publication because we have evidence that, "acting upon a recognition of his son's genius," he sought the posthumous publication of Cotter, Jr.'s poetry (Payne 5). Unfortunately, no evidence survives in the Cotter papers or the Du Bois archive of correspondence regarding the play's publication.

named because of the astounding level of racist violence against blacks” (James 182). Du Bois himself chronicled the “almost unbelievable” events of that year: “seventy-seven Negroes were lynched, of whom one was a woman and eleven were soldiers; of these, fourteen were publicly burned, eleven of them being burned alive” (*Dusk of Dawn* 132). Many of the attacks were aimed at returning African American soldiers, “some of them still in uniform—in one case for merely refusing to move off the sidewalk when asked to do so by a white woman” (Whalen 12). Partly due to increased militancy in the African American community and white America’s fear and desire to suppress such a mood, and partly due to economic pressures of the Great Migration of African Americans to industrial centers in the north, more than twenty race riots occurred in cities all over the United States (James 182). Out of these events, Du Bois published his famous “Returning Soldiers” editorial in May 1919:

For the America that represents and gloats in lynching, disenfranchisement, caste, brutality and devilish insult—for this, in the hateful upturning and mixing of things, we were forced by vindictive fate to fight also...But by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if, now that the war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land.

We return.

We return from fighting.

We return fighting. (13-14)

This editorial is a direct reversal of Du Bois’s earlier call to “Close Ranks” with white America and serve in the “war to end all wars.” Instead, he now calls for African Americans to “fight” the foremost battle at hand: the war for equal citizenship rights in the United States.

In this environment *On the Fields of France* was published in June of 1920. Through editorials in that issue, one sees that the concerns Du Bois brought up in “Returning Soldiers” were still the dominant interests of the journal. For example, in an essay titled “Presidential Candidates,” Du Bois lists seven topics the journal had requested the men running for President comment on: “Lynching,” “Jim Crow cars,” “Disfranchisement [sic],” “Haiti,” “National aid to Negro common schools,” “Colored army officers,” and “Segregation in the civil service” (69). After reporting the candidates’ replies (three of the men responded, fourteen ignored the journal’s request, and future-President Harding “replied that he would stand on the party platform”), Du Bois ends with an ominous statement: “We will forget these gentlemen neither in our prayers nor in our votes” (69). This warning echoes Du Bois’s “return fighting” command; he is marshalling African Americans to fight at home by using their votes as weapons. Because *On the Fields of France* was published at this time in *The Crisis*, it makes sense that Cotter would be fighting against (rather than idealistically supporting) the status quo. Yet the play is also doing something more; through its depiction of the heroism of the African American officer, the play adds its voice to the struggle to recuperate the history of African American servicemen.

On the Fields of France takes control of the image of the African American officer through its explicit presentation of the dual war motif. On the one hand, the play emphasizes the war happening in Europe; it is set on a “battlefield of Northern France” (Cotter 23) and shows the gory aftermath of fighting.⁶² The White Officer explains, “A shell has gone through my body and the fever has parched my lips... We went over the Boches’ [sic] trenches in a bombing squad and they got me coming back.” The Black Officer, speaking in great pain, shares similar ailments: “They’ve got me—through the lung... I was range-finding—and the snipers—got me. I

⁶² All quotes from the play are from Hatch and Hamalian’s *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance 1920-1940* (23-25).

have been dragging—myself towards our trenches—for an hour or so” (Cotter 23-24). Yet the Great War’s “shell[s],” “Boches’ trenches,” and “snipers” are not the only war present in the play. Through its presentation as a behavioral vortex, the battlefield becomes not only a “spatially induced carnival” (Roach 28) where black and white meet as equals, but it also shows No-man’s-land as a place “haunted” by the racist atrocities in the United States. For example, as the officers lie dying, they discuss the situation back at home. The Black Officer states that he is happy to die for “Liberty.” The White Officer, surprised, responds, “Do you feel that way too? I’ve often wondered how your people felt. We’ve treated you so bally [sic] mean over home that I’ve wondered if you could feel that way. I’ve been as guilty as the rest, maybe more so than some. But that was yesterday” (Cotter 23). Despite his final statement implying a new dawn of race relations, the White Officer’s speech highlights the fact that the United States is currently a war zone, one where African Americans are subject to unequal treatment and violence by the white majority. The White Officer even admits to racist behavior. While his final phrase, “that was yesterday,” indicates that he has learned a lesson and would not engage in such behavior again (if he were to live), his earlier statement says otherwise. By stating, “you feel that way too? I’ve often wondered how your people felt,” he equates the Black Officer’s opinion with all African Americans’. He shows that he views African Americans as a block of foreigners, able to be represented by one token member, and not as complex, flesh-and-blood Americans like himself. Thus, the “battlefield of Northern France” is haunted and permeated by the war at “home.” Yet, even though the homeland’s prejudice is so strong it follows its soldiers into no-man’s-land, the play also emphasizes African Americans’ heroic service to the nation: the black officer was wounded while fulfilling his duties, even though they put him in great danger. This presentation reverses the popular images of African American troops as cowardly incompetents.

Second, the play re-imagines the history of African American servicemen through its use of displaced transmission. Roach argues that through displaced transmission behaviors are transplanted to new places and come to mean something new because of the impossibility of exact replication (28-29). One sees this idea clearly in *On the Fields of France* where the African American officer, even though he is the other officer's equal, acts as a servant figure. The White Officer, parched with fever, asks the other, "Have you a drop to spare?" The African American Officer "hands his canteen to White Officer, who moistens his lips and hands it back" (Cotter 23-24). In one sense, this exchange shows the bond that has developed through service in the military; the men interact as humans, concerned about each other's welfare, and the White Officer drinks from the Black Officer's bottle, a notable occurrence at a time when segregated drinking fountains were the norm.⁶³ When seen in the context of the officers' whole exchange, however, one notices that it is the African American officer who continually serves the white, invoking images of slavery and Jim-Crow America. For example, the White Officer's "strength begins to fail and he slips back." He says, "My strength is going fast. Hold my hand. It won't feel so lonesome dying way over here in France" (Cotter 24). His request can be seen as a triumph over racist thought (and laws) that mandated physical separation of the races.⁶⁴ It also, however, seems eerily recognizable to an audience attuned to the familiarity slavery brought, where slave owners would often share the most intimate parts of their lives with personal

⁶³ This practice was not overturned until the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

⁶⁴ Joel Williamson, in an essay titled "The Separation of the Races," writes that "well before the end of Reconstruction, separation had crystallized into a comprehensive pattern which, in its essence, remained unaltered until the middle of the twentieth century" (31). This "pattern" included segregated schools and public facilities, and miscegenation laws (47). Segregation followed the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) to war; all branches of the United States military practiced segregation, and the extreme concern about interracial sex between African American soldiers and French women even pushed the AEF to distribute to French leaders the "infamous" memo, "Secret information concerning black American troops," a warning to keep African American soldiers away from white women (Whalan 48).

attendants or have their children nursed by slaves. For example, notice that the White Officer does not ask to be held; he commands it. He also gives, as an explanation for his request, his feeling that the Black Officer's hand will ease the pain of loneliness as he dies far from home. He uses the African American body to give himself comfort, like turning to a surrogate mother. This behavior can be seen as a transference of the behaviors of slavery to a different time and place (no-man's-land), but with new implications; the officers' actions highlight the blurring of boundaries between the warfront and the home front, past and present.

In contrast to this negative reading of the displaced transmission in the play, one can also read the scene as a sort of positive transference of behaviors that emphasizes African American officers' bravery and skill. Whalan notes that in African American "front line" literature, "white soldiers are shockingly embodied, and are given a physical vulnerability that differs greatly from how white characters are typically portrayed in peacetime African American writing. Often, these are fatally wounded bodies, available to an intimacy with black bodies that breaks with American social custom" (73). *On the Fields of France* conforms to this pattern; the white officer's body is highlighted, specifically its wounds, and the two men share physical intimacy (even dying hand in hand). This portrayal can be seen as the "white soldier's helplessness in the hands of a black soldier," where the white serviceman becomes "infantilized" and "feminized" (Whalan 74). In this context, the white officer's request, "Hold my hand. It won't feel so lonesome dying way over here in France" (Cotter 24), suddenly becomes the voice of a scared, powerless child. The black officer responds by taking his hand and saying, "I feel much better—myself. After all—it isn't so hard—to die when—you are dying for Liberty" (24). Seen in this light, his response becomes one of power and control; he is the competent adult who soothes the frightened officer by reminding him why each is there ("Liberty"). The reversal of the common

stereotypes of African American men as “infantilized” and “feminized” has important implications: it shows “black soldiers [taking] control of the lives of their incapacitated and passive white comrades” (Whalan 74). Read in this light, the African American officer’s care of the white officer’s body emphasizes not neo-slavery but a new beginning: the play shows African American officers’ heroism and power in the midst of identity-shattering chaos and destruction. With this portrayal, Cotter’s play joins Dunbar-Nelson and Burrill’s dramas in depicting African American service men as heroes, but the war front play bears a slight difference. In contrast to the upright, unblemished lead male bodies in *Mine Eyes Have Seen* and *Aftermath, On the Fields of France* foregrounds a black protagonist who is fatally wounded and crawls on the ground. This difference indicates a subtle shift in the plays’ depictions of masculinity, a shift away from an idealized African American male to the notion that masculinity comes in many forms, even in a shrapnel-peppered man who shows kindness on the battlefield.

The overall idealism, however, is difficult to ignore in *On the Fields of France*; the play is almost comic in its utopian vision of racial harmony. When analyzed in the context of the denigration of African American officers, the idealism serves a clear purpose: to document a positive history of African American service, a project that held as its primary goal an expansion of African American citizenship rights. For example, the officers see a “national pantheon” in the sky (Hutchinson 158). First, the white Officer glimpses George Washington, “clad in the Old Continentals” (Cotter 24). This vision is paired with the African American Officer seeing Crispus Attucks, the first American to die in what would eventually become the Revolutionary War (Lanning 3).⁶⁵ Next, the white Officer sees “Lee” and “those serried hosts behind him,--

⁶⁵ Attucks was an escaped slave who, as a seaman, had eluded capture for twenty years. In 1770, when a confrontation between British soldiers and colonists erupted, Attucks led the offensive and died at the hand of a British soldier. The colonists “declared Crispus Attucks a hero, for he

they're Forrest and his men" (Cotter 24). He refers to Robert E. Lee, the head of the Confederate Army in the Civil War, and Nathan Bedford Forrest, a famed Confederate cavalry officer (Hurst 4).⁶⁶ Finally, the African American Officer sees "Carney with the Old Flag," a reference to William H. Carney, a young Union sergeant in the Civil War who was the "first African American recipient of the country's highest award for valor in combat, the Medal of Honor" (Lanning 45).⁶⁷ As he loses strength and struggles to speak, the black Officer sees one more vision: "Shaw—and his black—heroes" (Cotter 24-25). He's seeing Robert Gould Shaw, a white commander of the African American Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment, who led his men in a gory battle against Confederate forces (Buckley 98). By pairing each of these figures (Washington with Attucks, Lee and Carney), the play becomes, as George Hutchinson argues, an "overt appeal to American civil religion" (158). It does this through a familial metaphor: "the rhetoric of national origins and traditions is inextricable from the rhetoric of family origins. Nationalists claim to have historical 'fathers' and 'mothers' whom they, like jealous children, defend against slander" (Dawahare 5). In *On the Fields of France*, however, the familial origins have a clear masculinist focus; the officers' visions emphasize the "fathers" of America and make an argument that the "seminal" figures of American history have been both white and black (but not female). By re-writing and adding to American history, the play is

took action against the British when others were willing only to talk; he stood against subjugation when others were willing to submit; he sacrificed his life for freedom when others were willing to live under hellish conditions" (Lanning 3)

⁶⁶ Forrest, known as the "Wizard of the Saddle," was an epic combatant: he "killed thirty Union soldiers hand to hand, had twenty-nine horses shot from beneath him, and was...feared by even his most warlike opponents." His personal life was also remarkable; he rose "from log cabin privation to wealth as an antebellum slave trader, became the only soldier South or North to join the military as a private and rise to the rank of lieutenant general" (Hurst 4).

⁶⁷ The mention of Carney's flag is significant; he famously picked up the Stars and Stripes during a battle and fought his way out. He declared afterward, "Boys, the old flag never touched the ground," a phrase that became famous in the North (Buckley 98).

explicitly trying to persuade Americans (white and black) that African Americans have as much at stake in the nation as those with European ancestry.

Similarly, the use of uniforms in the play emphasizes an idealized message at the same time as it reflects an argument for African American inclusion in the nation. While the one-act play gives no costume descriptions, the action tells us that both officers are in uniform: the white man, first glimpsing the black man, “sees that he is a fellow officer” (Cotter 23). This is significant because Jennifer Keene, noted historian of World War I, argues that uniforms had enormous potential to bring men together: “The U.S. Army uniform...had perhaps the greatest potential to create a bond between black and white soldiers. It was a badge of honor that identified otherwise dissimilar men, not only symbolizing faithful service and their status as defenders of the nation, but distinguishing them both from civilians and from members of other armies” (91-2).⁶⁸ Thus, each man in the same uniform reinforces the idealized vision that white and black can get along. All of this idealism, however, is not out of the ordinary; it corresponds with the larger trend in African American literature to correct the biased accounts of African American military service in World War I. Du Bois often made this case in the pages of *The Crisis*. For example, in a May 1919 editorial titled “History,” Du Bois argues that the facts about African American service in the Great War must be acknowledged and preserved. He writes that, while some claim that the “Negro officer is a failure,” the truth is that “the black laborers did well—the black privates can fight.” Furthermore, it is the “imperative duty of the moment” to “fix in history the status of our Negro troops” (Du Bois 11). Cotter’s play takes up this call; it

⁶⁸ Keene notes, however, that actual Army practices were not always so focused on equality: “The General Staff recognized the symbolic importance of the uniform by advising commanders not to issue the uniform white soldiers wore to black noncombatant troops. But like many army policies, this one was haphazardly enforced, and in many camps black and white soldiers wore some similar version of the national uniform” (92).

documents the valor of African American troops, specifically officers, so their accomplishments cannot be washed away by time or racism. Thus, the idealism in the play also insists on creating a space where returning veterans could have a positive future. It shows that African American soldiers participated valiantly in the war effort and that this service has warranted a renewed fight against Jim Crow laws and segregation.

The historical context of *On The Fields of France* also helps explain the idealism by suggesting a more militant reading of the play. If, as Belcher notes, Cotter penned this play in 1917 (xxvi), the text corresponds to the political maneuvering of its day. In 1917, the NAACP fought for and won the battle for African Americans to be commissioned as officers in the Great War (Imholte 398). Seen in this light, Cotter's depiction of the heroic African American Officer might have helped fight this battle (if it had appeared before the playwright's death). It is also important to note that the play was not read until June 1920, more than a year after the Armistice. By this time, the African American public knew that joining the war effort had not manifested the results they desired. Hatch and Hamalian comment on the play to that effect: "The irony is that they [the white and black officers] recognize their common heritage and their mutual estate when it is too late to act on that knowledge. In a sense, both have been deceived by the country that they presumably hold dear. Against that background, their final utterance must have a hollow ring for an audience of African Americans" (22). I would add that *many* of the characters' lines prove "hollow" by 1920, the African American officer's line about dying for "liberty" being a prime example (24). From a literary point of view, this utterance presents unintentional irony; the character does not use the term "liberty" with any sarcasm, but it would be hard for a post-war reader to take his statement at face value. From a production standpoint, this line provides a choice for the director: how does one (or should one) put the irony in the

staging? It seems that even though it is not intended, the irony could make the play more relevant to its audience of *Crisis* readers in 1920. By highlighting the irony, the director could bridge the gap between pre-war optimism and post-war cynicism, a move that suggests the play became *more* interesting (and gained more depth) after the playwright's death. In this context, the idealism of Cotter's play is severely undercut by the need to continue fighting the war for equality on the soil of the United States.

Thus, *On the Fields of France* moves beyond its apparent accommodationism to reveal an argument for the recuperation of the image of the African American soldier and, by extension, full African American citizenship rights. In this way, it fits more closely with Cotter's poetry and newspaper writing than it was first supposed. In fact, all of Cotter's World War I writing, his play included, uses "the memory of black participation in the Great War...to affirm idealism and to create optimism about the future," one of four motifs George Hutchinson traces in African American World War I literature ("Aftermath" 190). Thus, while the play might not be outwardly militant, it does wage its own war against segregation and Jim Crow laws through a recovery of African American combat history. This move "create[s] optimism about the future": the play encourages African Americans to keep fighting on the home front. Even though time has run out for the "Colored Officer" of the play, *On the Fields of France* broadcasts that change in America is still possible.

Randolph Edmonds's *Everyman's Land*

While Randolph Edmonds's *Everyman's Land* (1930) was published ten long years after Cotter's play, the texts have much in common; *Everyman's Land* seems like an anomaly in the context of Edmonds's other plays, it deals explicitly with the combat zone, and it joins the effort

to recuperate the image of African American soldiers in the quest to end segregation and Jim Crow laws. While much had changed in the United States in the years spanning the publication of both plays (women's suffrage, the boom of the 1920s, the Great Crash of 1929, and the rise and then dwindling of the Harlem Renaissance), the denigration of African American troops in World War I remained. In fact, as Lanning notes, by the 1930s relatively fewer options were available for African American advancement in the armed forces than before the Great War (155). Thus, *Everyman's Land* points out that even as late as the 1930s the record of the African American soldier needed to be rescued from minstrel images and misleading military history.

Although Edmonds, born in 1900, did not serve, he grew up during the Great War and certainly experienced the "war zone" of Jim Crow first hand. Edmonds, who was called "Shep" by his friends (Fletcher) but "S. Randolph" on official documents, was born to former slaves in Lawrenceville, Virginia (Krasner 25). His mother, Frances Fisherman Edmonds, died when Edmonds was twelve years old. Edmonds's father, George Washington Edmonds, was a sharecropper for a white plantation owner (Williams "S. Randolph" 68). Because of the need for field hands, Edmonds's early education was erratic; his help on the plantation took precedence over school and he attended only five months out of the year (Williams "S. Randolph" 68). By high school, however, Edmonds had demonstrated high potential, and although George Washington Edmonds couldn't support his son's education financially, he always encouraged his son's drive for excellence (Williams "Sheppard" 80). Edmonds's quest for education led him, in 1918, to New York to earn enough money to go back to high school. While in the city, Edmonds attended his first professional theatre performances (in his hometown, the theatres were open only to whites) (Williams "S. Randolph" 51). His life was changed forever; the plays, "as unimportant as they were, opened theatrical visions that he never knew existed" (Williams

“Sheppard” 79). Although Edmonds returned to Lawrenceville to finish high school and graduate valedictorian of the class of 1921 (Krasner 25), this first encounter with the theatre had long-lasting effects.

After high school Edmonds attended Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, and here he “made his path to the theatre through playwriting” (Williams “Sheppard” 83). He and other African American students organized The Dunbar Forum, an organization for Black students whose purpose “was to stage discussions, debates, dramatic readings, original creative literature, and plays” (Williams “Sheppard” 83). Edmonds’s first plays were produced by the group, and their success “aroused in him deep interest in college dramatics” (Williams “Sheppard” 84). He graduated with a B.A. in English in 1926 and went on to become the founder of African American educational theatre.

In contrast to Cotter, Edmonds had a long, illustrious career marked by breakthroughs in creating dramatic organizations and theatre departments in historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). His career spanned forty-three years, and during that time Edmonds worked tirelessly to develop African American playwriting, theatre, and audiences (Edmonds “What Good” 232). Edmonds began his career in 1926 at Morgan College in Baltimore as a professor of drama. In 1930 he organized, with four other HBCUs, the Negro Intercollegiate Dramatic Association (NIDA) and was elected its president. The group outlined six purposes:

1. to increase the interest in intercollegiate dramatics
2. to use dramatic clubs as laboratories for teaching and studying drama
3. to develop Negro folk materials
4. to develop aesthetic and artistic appreciation for the dramatic art
5. to train persons for cultural service in the community
6. to establish a bond of good will and friendship among the colleges. (Hill 262)

These goals are not separate from the widespread discrimination present in the United States at the time; they indicate an effort to work within the discriminatory laws of segregation to develop a truly “Negro” drama to strengthen the African American community. The creation of the NIDA had immediate results; Morgan College was the first Black College to create a “complete dramatic laboratory” (Hill 262), and it encouraged the formation of other collegiate dramatic associations (Bean 98).⁶⁹

In addition to his work with such groups, Edmonds continued his education and expanded his mission to nurture theatre programs at HBCUs. He attended graduate school at Columbia University and received an MA in Playwriting in 1934. In 1935, Edmonds moved on to Dillard University in New Orleans and became the Chair of their newly founded Drama Department (Krasner 25). At Dillard, he organized the Southern Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts (SADSA), a group with similar goals to NIDA (Hill 263). From 1937-1938 Edmonds studied drama in Dublin and London on a Rosenwald Scholarship, an experience that reinforced his belief in the promise of the Little Theatre Movement (Hill 263). Edmonds left New Orleans again during World War II when he “volunteered for the Army...and was commissioned a Captain in the Special Services.” In this position he developed an extremely successful entertainment program for African American troops (Williams “Sheppard” 109). Edmonds

⁶⁹ While clearly a leader in the field of educational African American theatre, Edmonds was not alone. Early figures in the movement include Adrienne McNeil Herndon, teacher of elocution at Atlanta University and the first known drama instructor at an HBCU (1895); Susan B. Dudley, who taught drama courses and directed plays at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College at the turn of the century; and Charles Winter Wood, a professional actor turned professor who taught drama and organized the Tuskegee Players at Tuskegee Institute. Other influential figures include Ernest Just, organizer of the Howard Players at Howard University in 1911; Anne Cooke Reid, who taught and directed plays at Spelman College, Atlanta University, and Howard University; Thomas Pawley, professor and director of plays at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, MO; and Lillian W. Voorhees, teacher and director at Talladega College. All worked diligently to establish dramatic societies on HBCU campuses and fought to include theatre in the university curriculum (Hatch and Hill 255-72).

finished his career as Chair of the Drama Department at Florida A and M University, working there from 1947 until his retirement in 1969 (Krasner 25).

Even before his death in 1983, Edmonds was hailed as “the father of black educational theatre” (Hill 263). He wrote forty-eight plays and published three collections: *Shades and Shadows* (1930), *Six Plays for a Negro Theatre* (1934), and *The Land of Cotton and Other Plays* (1942) (Krasner “Negro Drama” 67). Krasner notes, however, that Edmonds remains basically unknown outside of African American educational theatre. He speculates that the cause might be Edmonds’s time period (he was most prolific in the 1930s and 1940s, the period between the flowering of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement) or his focus on Southern culture (Krasner “The Theatre” 22). Scholars, most recently Krasner, are striving to restore Edmonds’s rightful place in the history of African American drama. In this chapter, I hope to add to that revival by analyzing Edmonds’s completely unknown World War I play, *Everyman’s Land*.

To understand the play, one must first become familiar with Edmonds’s dictates for African American theatre. For instance, Edmonds is primarily known as a playwright who fought against the proliferation of Northern, urban settings on the African American stage: his plays “foregrounded Southern, agrarian culture, with its ingrained fraternalism, community resilience, kinship ties, church fellowship, and rootedness to the land” (Krasner “Negro Drama” 67). Edmonds emphasizes these Southern roots through the use of dialect in his plays, which he defended vehemently against criticism (Edmonds “Preface” 7). His outlook was based on Booker T. Washington’s principles of “work ethic, propriety, Christian virtue, and racial uplift” (Krasner “Negro Drama” 67), beliefs which led Edmonds to a “‘hands on’ approach to pedagogy, emphasizing basic training [for African Americans] in stagecraft, acting, directing, and

playwriting rather than theatre as a political and revolutionary tool” (Krasner “The Theatre” 23). Clearly not an adherent of Du Bois’s calls for propaganda plays, Edmonds was a proponent of mixing Du Bois’s and Locke’s theories;⁷⁰ he typically “balanc[ed] Inner Life and Outer Life” in his plays (Hay 22). Edmonds was also known for his staunch support of the Little Theatre Movement. Frederick Koch, the famous proponent of American folk drama, even wrote the preface to Edmonds’s second book of plays, which Edmonds writes “is intended primarily for use in the Negro Little Theatres, where there has been for many years a great need for plays of Negro life written by Negroes” (“Preface” 7).

With Edmonds’s emphasis on Southern culture, dialect, and actual production, his *Everyman’s Land* certainly seems like a mystery; the play does none of the things for which he is known. In a foreword to the collection of plays Edmonds states that, “Although written in the form of drama, the following stories are for reading rather than for the stage” (5), directly contradicting his life-long emphasis on the importance of play production. The text itself is also an anomaly; the play is set in no-man’s-land in northern France, not the American South. As the curtain rises, a storm breaks out, complete with crackling thunder, lightning, and rain. A signal for attack comes and the stage bursts into combat; Americans and Germans fight and die in the mud as gunfire mixes with the thunder. The spectacle certainly suits Edmonds’s love of stagecraft; even though the play is meant only to be read, the act of imagining the natural furor of a storm joining man made war machines is striking. As the fighting dies down, the spotlight focuses on two American soldiers who perish and whose souls become outlined on the black sky at the back of the stage. These souls begin to speak. They learn each is an American soldier and, hand in hand, they walk through the darkness of “everyman’s land” (a sort of liminal afterlife) together.

⁷⁰ See Hay, Miller, and Krasner.

When the first soul learns the other was an African American soldier, he is shocked and flees. Suddenly, Mars, the god of war, appears and admonishes the first soul. The play ends with the two souls holding hands once again, “brothers” in war.

This lack of continuity with Edmonds’s typical style, in addition to *Everyman’s Land* never being produced, has contributed to the play being completely ignored by scholars.⁷¹ The play is noteworthy, however, for other reasons. It shows Edmonds as a developing writer; he published *Everyman’s Land*, written sometime between 1921 and 1926, in a collection of plays he penned while an undergraduate at Oberlin College (Williams 167). Perhaps more importantly (at least for this study), it attempts to present the actual combat of World War I, and by doing so it engages in the struggle to control the image of African American service in the trenches. Thus, while *Everyman’s Land* might seem strange in the context of Edmonds’s other plays, it makes sense when placed in conversation with the contemporary efforts to rewrite and recuperate the history of African American service in World War I, and by extension, African American claims to full citizenship rights.

From the beginning, the play emphasizes African American sacrifice in the Great War as the souls discuss how they were killed. The first soul, later revealed through dialogue as white, begins the conversation: “We have traveled far together, friend, and we know so little of each other. I was from Georgia. I was a Captain, and I was leading my company in the Ninety-Second

⁷¹ When *Shades and Shadows*, the collection in which *Everyman’s Land* appears, is mentioned at all, it is generally glossed over, such as in Krasner (“The Theatre” 29) and Bloom (48). The only actual discussions of the collection come from Benjamin Brawley, a critic who was a contemporary of Edmonds, and Allen Williams, an Edmonds scholar. Both note that the plays illustrate Edmonds’s formative stages: Brawley writes, “Not yet had he found his true bent” (53), and Williams adds, “It is evident, after an examination of the plays in this first anthology, that Edmonds had not yet developed his command of dramatic technique” (167). Yet neither ventures into actual analysis of the plays contained in the collection, and neither ever mentions *Everyman’s Land*.

division when a bullet ripped my heart, and I found myself in this awful land of the shadow.”⁷² Here the focus clearly is on the Great War, with its “division[s]” and “bullet[s],” yet the soul’s mention of Georgia, the deep south of ingrained racism, intimates that another war is brewing. The second soul replies, “I was a first lieutenant. I was in the fighting Fifteenth regiment.” After the first soul exclaims that he’s never heard of them, the second soul informs him, “It came from New York. It was one of the few all colored regiments.” “You fought in a colored regiment— then you must be colored,” the first soul exclaims. The second soul rejoins, “I was colored until a grenade exploded in my face, now I am where no light shineth” (137). This humorous exchange highlights the notion that death takes us all, regardless of race, and that skin color does not exist in death. Here the carnage of no-man’s-land is presented as “egalitarian”: “the Great War saw technologies that were capable of reducing everybody, regardless of race, to fragments, pieces of bone and flesh” (Whalan 74). The African American soldier’s sarcastic response also illuminates his (and by extension, all African American soldiers’) bravery and participation in heavy fighting.

Yet the two souls’ conversation also reveals that the formerly white soul assumed he was talking to another white soldier. His presumption might be based on the limited numbers of African American combat troops in World War I (forty thousand), but it is also indicative of the idea that “American” equals “white,” a common trope in both American propaganda for the war and American literature (Whalan 34). It is also an idea May Miller will tease out in *Stragglers in the Dust* (1930). The first soul’s shock at having befriended a black man (he starts the conversation by calling him “friend”), however, also illuminates the crumbling of the boundary between home front and warfront. The racist dictates of mainstream American society (more

⁷² All quotes from the play are taken from Edmonds’s *Shades and Shadows*, Boston: Meador, 1930. 131-140.

specifically, Georgia) have permeated the battleground. Issues of race and racism start to trump similarities such as military service or both having died in the line of fire.

The presence of this second “war” becomes even clearer with the first soul’s next action. He stammers, “I didn’t know you were colored. I couldn’t see your skin in this awful darkness,” as if he is trying to convince an unseen god of segregation who mandates separation of the races at all times. He then decides, “I must leave you. It is impossible for us to ever find the light together.” Crestfallen, the second soul replies, “But we started out as friends.” Ignoring this remark, the soul of the white soldier flees (138). His flight continues until the end of the play, when Mars, the god of war, enters in a chariot and entreats both souls to ride with him to the “heaven of soldiers.” The first soul, “noticing that there is no room save that beside the colored soul,” asks, “But where shall I sit?” (139). His question exemplifies a “Jim Crow car” mentality; surely Mars does not expect him to sit next to a former black man? The war on the home front has ruined any community the men had found in this liminal world of the dead. Through this depiction, the play suggests that the racism of American society is so strong it reaches into the battlefield, where soldiers are supposed to have common cause, and even into the afterlife.

Despite this negative portrayal of the United States as a war zone for African Americans, the play emphasizes that they are loyal to their country. With this emphasis on “community,” the play rebuts reports of African American soldiers as disloyal cowards in an effort to prove the injustice of discriminatory practices such as segregation and Jim Crow laws. For instance, before the souls’ races are revealed, the men bond over their shared patriotism and service to the country. The soul of the African American takes the other’s hand and states, “Americans should always stick together—even in the land of death.” The first soul concurs: “I consider it a privilege in having died for America. I was leading my men when a piece of shrapnel hit me in

the chest. It tore my body to pieces, but if I had my life to live over again, I'd do the same thing.” The second soul replies, “America is a great country. In spite of her many faults, if I had twelve lives, I'd give them all for her” (136). This final line indicates that, despite the men's loyalty, all is not well in the United States; it does have some “faults,” such as Jim Crow laws and failure to pass anti-lynching legislation. The emphasis here, however, seems to lie less on America as a war zone and more on the African American soldier's patriotism *despite* inequality at home; he would die a dozen times to honor his country. He imagines the United States as a “community” that is accessible in time, and the play shows that African Americans have paid the price of admittance.

To this end, the play also explicitly trumpets African American bravery in combat. When Mars, in a *deus ex machina* moment of grand proportions, shows up with “four white horses...drawing a flaming chariot which dyes them pink,” he admonishes the first soldier for his prejudice and sets the record straight: “You both fought bravely, and I have come to take you to the heaven of soldiers” (139). His statement shows that both the white and the black soldier possessed courage and did his part for his nation. *Both* were heroic enough to earn the special afterlife reserved for soldiers. This honor makes a strong argument for African American citizenship rights by lauding African American men as just as capable and loyal as white soldiers. Mars is right to acknowledge that African Americans have died (and, according to the second soul, are willing to die over and over again) to prove their fitness for inclusion in the “community” of America. With this resolution, *Everyman's Land* rewrites the history of African American combat troops and reclaims the image of the black soldier.

This message is further reinforced by the play's use of historically accurate military information. The African American soul states he was with the “Fifteenth regiment” from New

York. Edmonds drew from actual history here; this group was the “Fifteenth New York National Guard Infantry Regiment,” New York’s first all-black regiment (Harris 34). The troops were first used as common laborers in France (Harris 157), but when the regiment was put under French command, it was designated the 369th U.S. Infantry and converted into a combat unit.⁷³ The 369th “spent 191 days on the front line and were the first Allied troops to reach the Rhine.” To honor such bravery, the regiment was “awarded the Croix de Guerre, with 170 individuals gaining the medal” (Whalan 6).⁷⁴ By attaching the African American soul to this particular regiment, *Everyman’s Land* strives to keep the history of “Harlem’s Hellfighters” alive and leverage it into positive change for African Americans at home, much as African American newspapers of the time were doing. For example, Fred Moore, editor of New York’s *Age*,

wanted everyone to know the glorious deeds of New York’s black heroes, most specifically the President of the United States. Woodrow Wilson had thus far refused to publicly condemn a rash of lynchings that were spreading across the south like the kudzu vine—choking off life. If Wilson knew that black soldiers were fighting and dying for their country then he might act, say something. *Anything*” (Harris 195).

⁷³ While this change was celebrated by many, the actual circumstances of the regiment being transferred to French command were extremely problematic. At the time (March of 1918), General Pershing was facing pressure from the French for fresh bodies; they needed troops to replace their dwindling ranks, yet Pershing refused to offer white American soldiers as cannon fodder. Pershing also had the problem of figuring out what to do with the African American regiments. According to Capt. Hamilton Fish, transferring the Fifteenth to French control was the “perfect solution”: “The French were crying for the U.S. regiments to go into the French Army. So I guess Pershing figured he could kill two birds with one stone—solve the problem on what to do with us [African American soldiers] and give something to the Foch” (qtd. in Harris 179). The change in numerical designation was also fraught with racism: “any number higher than 200 meant that draftees made up the regiment—a belittlement proclaiming they had been forced to enlist.” Yet the soldiers of the 369th had all volunteered (Harris 177).

⁷⁴ The regiment also gained fame for introducing Europe to jazz, an aspect not explored in the play.

The appeal, along with major media coverage of African American war heroes Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts, proved successful. After three long months of silence, Wilson publicly denounced lynching (although he never supported legislative action to enforce its punishment) (Harris 204). Like the newspapers and Cotter's *On the Fields of France, Everyman's Land* kept pushing to recover and re-write the history of African Americans in World War I to ensure their bravery and sacrifices would be used for some benefit on the home front.

The play ends in a manner similar to Cotter's drama as well; the soldiers reconcile in an idealized display of brotherly love. To induce this ending, Mars, "bellowing like a mad bull," tells the white soul: "You'll sit beside your brother or stay here and wander forever in this land of darkness. Everyone who dies on the battle-field is a brother, and all are one in the heaven of war" (139). This odd phrase, "heaven of war," suggests a belief in war as an instrument for progress, a young person's idealization of war as a necessity that could bring out one's true self. By the play's publication in the 1930s, however, after the destruction wrought by World War I and with another major conflict on the horizon, the reader would have had a hard time accepting this sort of glorification of war. Mars also, however, pairs the souls as "brothers," using nationalism's "rhetoric of family origins" (Dewahare 5) to indicate that the two men are equal and deserving of the same treatment. The previously racist first soul is converted; he jumps into the chariot, sits beside the other soul, and takes his hand. He implores the African American soul, "Forgive me, brother!" (139-40). With this line, the chariot floats away over the carnage of the battlefield (in this fantasy meant only to be read, not staged). When the white soldier's actions are read as sincere, he seems to have been transformed (to use the vocabulary of Victor Turner's ritual theory) by his journey to the liminal zone of "everyman's land." His new identity recognizes the national family (or, more specifically, the "brother[hood]") to which both he and

the African American soul belong. With this idealized ending, *Everyman's Land* suggests that such a transformation might not be limited to a fantasy. Rather, the play's ending gives hope that African American service in the Great War, as long as it is documented and remembered, might cause some "real life" transformations as well.

One can also read the white soldier's conversion, however, with a bit more skepticism, an attitude that is fitting since the play was not published until 1930, well after the optimism of the war years had died down. With this lens, Mars's threat that the white soul must sit next to the black soldier or "wander forever in this land of darkness," seems the only reason the white soul has a change of heart. Metaphorically, Mars represents the United States government, and inclusion in the chariot represents being granted equality (although in death). The play argues that the government, armed with a "huge war club" (139), must make and enforce laws to engage African Americans as true citizens, a project that African American service in the Great War has warranted. Through this reading, one can see *Everyman's Land* in direct conversation with the major issues of full African American citizenship of the decade: Jim Crow laws and segregation.

The very title of Edmonds's play highlights this message. On one level, *Everyman's Land* simply refers to the inevitability of death. Everyone, no matter what race, will eventually inhabit this space. Such an interpretation is also reinforced by the epigraph to the play, taken from Homer's *Iliad*: "And they die / An equal death—the idler and the man / Of mighty deeds" (131). The quotation emphasizes the notion that, important citizen or no-name commoner, black or white, everyone is equal in death. Yet the play's title also riffs on the phrase "no-man's-land," and the two spaces are directly contrasted by the first soul. He tells his companion, "A while ago we were in no man's land; but now we are in everyman's land—the land of death" (135). The two spaces, however, do not seem that different; no-man's-land, the ghostly stretch of earth

between the trenches, was definitely a “land of death” and can be thought of as a liminal space similar to the limbo in which the two souls have found themselves. Yet, African American writing about the war also has the tradition of presenting no-man’s-land as a “strangely liberating” space, one where “servicemen...would undergo changes that had profound consequences for American racial politics” (Whalan 48-49). Edmonds’s *Everyman’s Land* follows this trend; in the play, the two soldiers encounter each other in a way that a legally defined space such as a nation (specifically the United States) would not have allowed; they meet in a “liberating” space. This idea is especially emphasized at the end of the play when the racist white soldier has been fully transformed (either by his time in the space or by the threat of Mars’s club) and declares the black soldier his “brother” (140). In this sense, the title *Everyman’s Land* is a positive declaration of the transformative powers of no-man’s-land; the play (re)constructs African American service in the trenches to show that America *can* become an “everyman’s land.” Yet the play’s title also highlights the fact that America is not yet such a space. The play’s depiction of the United States, with prejudices so strong they reach even into death, points out that America, the harbinger of democracy to the rest of the world, is not *itself* a place for “everyman.” Rather, the United States seems to be more of a no-man’s-land for African Americans, with danger and death possible at every turn. Through this depiction, *Everyman’s Land* critiques the United States and suggests, however indirectly, that a transformation (along the lines of what the white soldier experienced) is needed.

Ultimately, both Cotter’s *On the Fields of France* and Edmonds’s *Everyman’s Land* strike out into the terrifying depths of no-man’s-land to reclaim the image of African American combat troops from the debasing images popularized by military history and the minstrel shows. Both also show that the United States is *as much* a war zone for African Americans as northern

France is for the belligerents. In fact, it takes the extraordinary circumstances of trench warfare in the liminal space of no-man's-land (along with a club-wielding god) to bridge the gap between races in the plays. Thus, the optimism in both plays can be seen as tempered: they argue, much as Du Bois did in his 1919 "Returning Soldiers" editorial, that as long as African Americans keep fighting, hope exists: one day, America can be "everyman's land."

Chapter Three

Ghosts of the Great War: Memory and Memorial in May Miller's *Stragglers In the Dust* and
Langston Hughes's "The Colored Soldier"

In 1929, amid the crumbling of the Western world's financial system, a flood of profitable Great War books saturated the market. They ushered in the "war boom" of 1929-1930, a period when war novels and memoirs took over publishers' (and the public's) minds (Eksteins 277). The timing of this "boom" is surprising; during the early years of the Great Depression over 26,300 American businesses collapsed, including 1,372 banks, and unemployment in the United States jumped from 1.5 million in 1929 to 4.3 million in 1930 (Watkins 43-44). Yet the public's fascination with Great War tales overcame these catastrophes as they spent scarce resources on books, plays, and movies about World War I (Eksteins 277). One explanation for such behavior is the natural progression of time; scholars posit that ten years needed to pass before the horror and devastation of World War I could be dealt with on a wide-scale cultural level (Whalan 200). Another reason, put forth by Modris Eksteins, is that a younger generation who had not directly participated in the home front or warfront exploits of the Great War was "naturally curious" about the specter that haunted their lives (297). Yet the precise timing of the Crash of '29 and a "boom" in the production and sale of Great War literature also suggests a more symbolic explanation. By looking back at the war, Americans not only could see the war in a new light, they also could find a resonance between the uncertainty of the war years and the current economic crisis that would allow them to understand their present situation in a new way (Eksteins 297).

For African Americans, the link between the war boom and the Great Depression was even more pronounced; as the economic situation worsened, the United States became a more hazardous war zone. Typically “last hired, first fired,” African Americans suddenly found themselves competing for jobs whites previously had not wanted: “whites demanded that blacks be discharged as domestic servants, garbage collectors, elevator operators, waiters, bellhops, and street cleaners” (McElvaine 187). Particularly in the South, masses of armed white men were reported to have threatened employers who hired African Americans. As a result, the replacement of African American workers with white ones became a common occurrence (Greenberg 25). One group in Atlanta, Georgia, even adopted the slogan: “No Jobs for Niggers Until Every White Man Has a Job” (McElvaine 187). And while the experiences of African American workers varied by region, class, gender, and education, in 1930, when 17% of the white population was unemployed, 38% of African Americans were out of work (Greenberg 21-22). Economic devastation was not the only effect of the Great Depression. During the early years of the Depression, race-motivated violence in the United States escalated significantly. A report by the National Youth Administration, Division of Negro Affairs, stated: “As the competition in earning a livelihood increased, social unrest grew and racial prejudice became more severe, to the extent that racial friction and lawlessness increased in many sections of the rural South” (Trotter 200). The violence became so extreme that the number of lynchings reported in the United States more than tripled between 1932 and 1933 (McElvaine 187). As a writer for *The Nation* put it, “Dust had been blown from the shotgun, the whip, and the noose, and Ku Klux practices were being resumed in the certainty that dead men could not only tell no tales but [they could] create vacancies” (qtd. in Greenberg 25). With the increase in economic strain and violence against African Americans, the home front of America had become (once

again) a battleground. Yet the war on the home front in the 1930s was different than the late 1920s, when African American World War I plays focused on issues of segregation and the (mis)representation of African American soldiers. While these were still important issues in the early years of the Great Depression, because of the economic collapse and spike in race-related violence, the hot-button issues became economic exclusion and lynching.

With these realities as a backdrop, two African American playwrights published World War I drama in 1930 and 1931 that negotiated between a fearful public's desire for uplift and safety and the artists' desires for radical social change: May Miller and Langston Hughes. As members of a younger generation of African American World War I playwrights, Miller and Hughes had vastly different relationships to the war than did their predecessors. Neither Miller nor Hughes was active in wartime volunteerism, as Dunbar-Nelson was, nor did either have close friends killed in the war, as Cotter did. Instead, the Great War for Miller and Hughes seems almost a symbolic touchstone for issues such as racist violence, economic freedom, and ethnic nationalism. Their World War I writings reflect this new outlook as well as the period in which they were writing: the Great Depression, with its devastating economic effects and the increased racial prejudice and violence in the United States. In the face of these issues, May Miller's 1930 *Stragglers in the Dust* and Langston Hughes's 1931 "The Colored Soldier" both focus on the memorialization of the war on the home front and the "ghosts" of the war haunting 1930s American society. This emphasis on ghosts (both metaphorical, in terms of World War I and the Depression "haunting" the texts, and literal, with actual ghosts appearing in the dramas) is better understood through Marvin Carlson's theory of ghosting in the theatre, explicated in *The Haunted Stage*. He argues,

Any theatrical production weaves a ghostly tapestry for its audience, playing in

various degrees and combinations with that audience's collective and individual memories of previous experiences with this play, this director, these actors, this story, this theatrical space, even, on occasion, with this scenery, these costumes, these properties...[Ghosting has] always been central to the functioning of theatre as a repository and living museum of cultural memory. (Carlson 165)

Carlson discusses the ways all aspects of theatre, including scripts, actors' bodies, and costumes, are layered with "ghosted," doubled meanings as they are recycled and recalled. While neither Miller's nor Hughes's play was produced (and thus one can't discuss the ways the productions were "haunted"), both texts overflow with ghosted, double meanings. Yet, the ghosting of these plays is not just in their content; it is also present in their form, a genteel approach that uses techniques from earlier texts.⁷⁵ This haunted recycling is employed to appeal to audiences who were fearful and uneasy in the wake of economic and social upheaval, including the surge in violence against African Americans in the U.S., the rise of socialist movements, and the rise of fascism in Europe.

Miller had important connections to African American discourse about the war. Born on January 26, 1899 on the campus of Howard University in Washington, D.C., her parents were

⁷⁵ Throughout most of the nineteenth century, the genteel tradition was the dominant literary mode in America. Paula Bernat Bennett, whose article "Rewriting Dunbar: Realism, Black Women Poets, and the Genteel," analyzes the influence of the genteel in African American poetry at the turn of the century, notes that in the nineteenth century the style was "used by all authors, whatever their class, ethnic, or racial backgrounds, with few exceptions" (147). The style was characterized by a concern with "the 'Good' and the 'Beautiful' aspects of bourgeois life, never turning its eye to social or political realities" (Giordano 36). In African American literature, this tradition manifested itself through a "'trinity' of genteel dogma: a focus on morality and uplift, a faith in a progress conveniently linked to morality, and the aspiration of a learned (not native) culture" (Huggins 143). The texts were expected to "put the race's best foot forward," present "'counterstereotypes' to white propaganda," and dwell upon "culture, manners, sobriety, respectability and...Christian piety" (Bryant 27). The tradition was "integrationist in orientation," with authors using the style to "emphasize their similarities to other educated Americans and to protest their exclusion from the American mainstream" (Bruce).

Annie Mae Butler Miller, a teacher in the Baltimore area, and Kelly Miller, the famous Howard University sociology professor who founded the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center (Shafer 309) and wrote the 1919 *History of the World War for Human Rights*, a study of African Americans in the Great War. May Miller was encouraged to read, write, and act by her parents, and she attended the M Street School (later renamed Paul Laurence Dunbar High School) where her teachers included playwrights Angelina Weld Grimke and Mary P. Burrill (Brown-Guillory 61). Burrill encouraged Miller to write her first play, *Pandora's Box*, in 1914. In 1916 Miller graduated from high school and majored in drama at Howard University. She matriculated in 1920 and began a twenty-four year career at Frederick Douglass High School in Baltimore, Maryland, where she taught drama, speech, and dance (Russell-Robinson 284). As an instructor, Miller became well known for her plays that educated students about African American history.

Miller was also active in the theatre outside of school and helped shape the development of African American drama during the Harlem Renaissance. She joined W.E.B. Du Bois's little theatre group, the Baltimore Krigwa Players, where she performed and directed (Perkins and Stephens 175). Through this group Miller met Randolph Edmonds, another African American World War I playwright (Russell-Robinson 284). Miller also attended her good friend Georgia Douglas Johnson's famous S Street Salon, a place where she mingled with many of the most famous African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance, including Alice Dunbar Nelson and Langston Hughes (Perkins and Stephens 175). In her own right, Miller was an accomplished playwright of the movement; she won third place with her play *The Bog Guide* in *Opportunity's* 1925 contest, and honorable mention for *The Curs'd Thing* (Roses 237). She also coauthored two important anthologies of African American drama with Willis Richardson: *Plays and Pageants of Negro Life* (1930) and *Negro History in Thirteen Plays* (1935).

Miller retired from teaching in 1944 and, feeling that there was no longer an audience for her plays, also quit writing drama to focus solely on poetry. In 1986 she was honored with the Mister Brown Award for Excellence in Drama and Poetry, sponsored by the National Conference of African American Theatre (Perkins and Stephens 176). Miller died on February 9, 1995. She is now hailed as the most prolific African American female playwright of her time (Stephens 108), and as a playwright whose “contribution to black drama is almost inestimable” (Brown-Guillory 62) because of her pioneering experiments with character and form.

Langston Hughes also has interesting ties to the Great War. He was born on February 1, 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, and soon after his parents, Carolina “Carrie” Mercer Langston Hughes,⁷⁶ a former government clerk with theatrical ambitions (Sanders 1), and James Nathaniel Hughes, a mining company stenographer, separated. James immigrated to Mexico while Carrie took Hughes to live in Lawrence, Kansas, with her mother, Mary Langston. This led to a tumultuous childhood, one where Hughes at times was left in the care of family or friends, at other times summoned by his mother to a new city (Rampersad 13-24). Ultimately, at the age of fifteen and after another family crisis and move, Hughes chose to stay in Cleveland, Ohio, where he attended Central High School, the “best public school in Cleveland” (Rampersad 25). It was here that Hughes’s passion for writing blossomed: his first published poems appeared in Central High’s *Monthly*, and in the fall of 1918, he joined its editorial staff. The United States was deeply embroiled in the Great War at the time and, much like the writing of his contemporary Joseph S. Cotter, Jr., the majority of the poetry Hughes published in the *Monthly* focused on the

⁷⁶ Regennia N. Williams and Carmaletta M. Williams note that Hughes’s mother’s given name was Carolina, but that as an adult she was “alternately referred to as ‘Carolyn Hughes’ (after her marriage to Nathaniel Hughes, Langston’s father), ‘Carolyn Hughes Clark’ (after her divorce from Langston’s father and marriage to Homer Clark), and ‘Carrie Clark’” (106). Like these authors, I will use “Carrie” for the remainder of this chapter.

war effort (Rampersad 27). Hughes was too young to consider serving in the Great War, however, and he makes little mention of it in his memoirs. When he does write about the conflict, it is often to draw the reader's attention to inequalities on the home front. For example, writing about the Armistice, Hughes remembers:

That November the First World War ended. In Cleveland, everybody poured into the streets to celebrate the Armistice. Negroes, too, although Negroes were increasingly beginning to wonder where, for them, was that democracy they had fought to preserve. In Cleveland, a liberal city, the color line began to draw tighter and tighter. Theatres and restaurants in the downtown area began to refuse to accommodate colored people. Landlords doubled and tripled the rents at the approach of a dark tenant. And when the white soldiers came back from the war, Negroes were often discharged from their jobs and white men hired in their places. ("The Big" 51)

This focus on racial inequality in the United States and how it mingles with the legacy of the Great War is directly reflected in Hughes's World War I writing.

It was not until after the war (and Hughes's high school poetry about the conflict), that Hughes's writing gained widespread popularity; by the mid-1920s, Hughes had become one of the most recognized authors of the Harlem Renaissance. In June of 1921, *Crisis* published "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," then other poems and stories. Rampersad emphasizes the meteoric nature of this success: "In a few short months Hughes had become virtually the house poet of the most important journal in black America" (48). This success was followed by the publication of two books of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), and a novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930). In 1926 Hughes also collaborated with several of the up-

and-coming Harlem Renaissance writers to publish a little magazine called *Fire*, with the intent that “it would burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past, *épater le bourgeois* into a realization of the existence of the younger Negro writers and artists” (Hughes “Big Sea” 235). During this time Hughes also attended Columbia University for one year (where he was extremely unhappy), sailed to Africa as a crew member of a freighter, worked in Paris for several months, and attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania where he would graduate with a bachelor’s degree in 1929 (Rampersad 171). Looking back on the time that he described as “the period when the Negro was in vogue,” Hughes would state, “The ordinary Negro hadn’t heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn’t raised their wages any” (“Big Sea” 228). He continued to publish poetry, plays, operas, children’s stories, short stories, newspaper columns, and autobiographies up until his death on May 22, 1967.

While Hughes is primarily known for his poetry, he also had a sustained interest in playwriting and the theatre. He acted in high school plays (Rampersad 36), and throughout his adult life wrote dramatic material (Jones 77). He completed close to one hundred “theatre pieces” (Hill and Hatch 313) and wrote “everything from vaudeville sketches to opera libretti to several full-length dramas” (Jones 77). He was active in creating a network to sustain African American theatre, and in 1931 he joined three other John Reed Club members to form the New York Suitcase Theatre (Rampersad 215). The company soon collapsed without staging any plays, but in 1938 Hughes revived the idea and founded the Harlem Suitcase Theatre. Affiliated with the Communist Party, the theatre was radical in purpose and staged Hughes’s poetry play *Don’t You Want to Be Free?* (1938), starring the emerging actor Robert Earl Jones (Rampersad 356).⁷⁷

⁷⁷ In 1939 Hughes would also found the New Negro Theatre in Los Angeles, a “counterpart to the Harlem group” of the Suitcase Theatre (Rampersad 369). In 1940, Hughes was given an

In September 1930, a year before Hughes published “The Colored Soldier,” he even lived with an acting company, Jasper Deeter’s Hedgerow Theatre in Rose Valley, Pennsylvania, a white company devoted to non-commercial theatre. Hughes worked several hours in the box office there and lived communally with the rest of the troupe (Rampersad 191). Of this experience, Hughes wrote: “I’m getting a sort of inside slant on the theatre, watching the rehearsals and the plays every night” (quoted in Rampersad 191). This experience fostered a “period of intense dramatic activity” for Hughes, and he wrote more than ten dramatic pieces from 1930-1942 (Sanders 6). It is this background from which Hughes wrote his World War I dramatic recitation, “The Colored Soldier.”

“The Gold Star Turns to Brass”: Memory, Memorial, and Erasure in May Miller’s *Stragglers in the Dust* (1930)

On April 5, 1930 the *Chicago Defender*, the most influential African American newspaper of its day, published an editorial cartoon that lambasted the United States government’s hypocrisy in honoring its war dead. The cartoon shows an African American woman standing on a pier, head bowed in sorrow, as a ship filled with white Gold Star Mothers sails away. The woman holds a sign that reads “National Disgrace to Gold Star Mothers” and at her feet is a star labeled “Jim Crow” (“Editorial” 14) (see Appendix B). The cartoon references the treatment of African American Gold Star Mothers—those women who lost sons or husbands in the Great War. The honorary title of “Gold Star Mother” references the service flags families would hang in their windows: a blue star indicated a family member in active duty; a gold star represented a family member who had died. According to the United States government, these

“honorary position” in the Negro Playwrights Company, a group formed in New York City with Richard Wright, Ted Ward, and Powell Lindsay to “further black drama” (Rampersad 388).

women had given the highest feminine sacrifice for the nation: their sons' bodies.⁷⁸ To commemorate such service, in 1929 Congress passed legislation authorizing the federal funding of Gold Star pilgrimages, trips to France and England so the women could visit their sons' graves. Calvin Coolidge signed the legislation before he left office in March 1929, and Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt later authorized pilgrimages from 1930-1933 (Piehler 102). Every aspect of the voyage was paid for, from luxury liners to first-class hotels, even as the Depression ravaged the country's treasury (Piehler 102). Part of the impetus for such expenditure was that the pilgrimage "served to affirm that those who had died for their country in Europe had fought for a noble cause" (Piehler 103). The government also felt the trip emphasized the unity of the diverse strands of the nation; all mothers, press accounts stated, received the same treatment no matter their class, religion, or country of origin (Piehler 104). The pilgrimages reinforced post-war propaganda that America was a unified front.

Yet, as the *Chicago Defender* cartoon makes clear, the treatment of African American Gold Star Mothers caused a rupture in that façade. The War Department, with encouragement from President Hoover, segregated the African American Gold Star mothers from their white counterparts in bereavement. Instead of luxury liners and hotels, the War Department booked the African American women on commercial vessels and in boarding houses (Piehler 104, "58 Negro" 9). This treatment caused a firestorm in the African American press and garnered

⁷⁸ Piehler notes that the fathers of slain servicemen were left out of the equation: "The Gold Star pilgrimages declared that a woman's greatest role in life remained that of mother and nurturer. It maintained, moreover, that the maternal bond surpassed the paternal one. Although there had been some talk of including fathers in the pilgrimage, in the end Congress decided that only women could take part" (102).

protests from both black and white Americans.⁷⁹ All objections, however, were futile; the War Department stuck by its policy of discrimination. In response, almost all of the African American Gold Star Mothers refused the Jim Crow trip; only fifty-eight of the four hundred thirty African American women eligible went on the pilgrimage (“Gold Star” 1). This disappointing end to what could have been a journey to heal the mothers’ grief and the nation’s festering racial sores mirrors the *Defender* cartoon’s caption: “The Gold Star Turns to Brass” (“Editorial” 14).

This controversy has intimate ties to May Miller’s 1930 *Stragglers in the Dust*. Because she wrote the play at the very height of the Gold Star pilgrimage debate, the play focuses on legacies of the war, motherhood, and Americanism. Equally important is the fact that the play’s protagonist, Nan, is a Gold Star Mother who shines the brass rails of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. For Nan, the “star” of honor and equality has literally turned to “brass.” The play opens with Nan, rags and bucket at hand, dreamily staring at the Tomb. In her reverie, she does not see a pale, ghost-like figure darting between columns of the amphitheatre, a man later revealed as a shell-shocked veteran of the war. Mac, the Irish watchman, enters and tells Nan it’s time for the cemetery to close. Their dialogue reveals Nan’s love of the Tomb; she believes, based on the speeches she heard on the day of the Unknown Soldier’s interment, that her son Jim lies there. As Nan heads home, an important-looking white gentleman mounts the steps. He and Mac discuss Nan’s attachment to the Tomb, with both men expressing incredulity. The gentleman, Mr. Bradford, spits out, “Why that isn’t even possible...But if it were—what a terrible joke on

⁷⁹ See “58 Negro War Mothers To Have Ship to Selves” *Chicago Daily Tribune*; “Gold Star Mothers Sail for France on Freight Steamer,” “Protest Segregation of Gold Star Mothers,” “Their Sons Died for Segregation” *Chicago Defender*; “Negro Gold Star Mothers Refuse Trip to Sons’ Graves” *Washington Post*.

America!”⁸⁰ Having temporarily settled that unnerving possibility, Bradford informs Mac that he is looking for his son, a veteran who suffers from “attacks” and has been missing for two days. The men spot the “Straggler” and attempt a rescue. Worked into a fury, the veteran explains why he has been haunting the Tomb: he also believes that a black man is the Unknown Soldier. During intense fighting in no-man’s-land, an African American soldier rescued the Straggler but later was killed. The veteran believes that he should have died, and that the honor of being the Unknown Soldier should have been his. Thus, he is attempting to enter the Tomb at sundown, when he thinks the black soldier’s ghost will return. At the end of the play, in a strange psychological leap, Mr. Bradford suddenly starts to believe his son’s vision; the two men narrate their hallucination of a black soldier striding across the sky toward the Tomb. The Straggler breaks free, runs toward the sarcophagus, and collapses in a heap on the stairs. Disturbed, Mac runs to the boy and reports he has died. Bradford, still lost in his son’s vision, replies that it is not his son’s body; his son has entered the Tomb. Mac, slightly dazed, follows Bradford off the stage. All that remains is the Tomb of the Unknown, guarded by a lone, silent soldier.

This fascinating play was never produced and remained unpublished until Kathy Perkins included it in the groundbreaking 1989 anthology *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays Before 1950*. These circumstances have led to relatively little in-depth scholarly attention, although the play is briefly discussed in several texts.⁸¹ Most of these discussions highlight the play’s contention that the Unknown Soldier could be black. In this respect, however, *Stragglers in the Dust* is not alone. Miller was among a handful of African American and Euro-American

⁸⁰ All quotes from *Stragglers in the Dust* are taken from the version of the play in Kathy Perkins’s *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays Before 1950*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989. 143-152.

⁸¹ Allen, Beach, Patton and Honey, Perkins and Stephens, Russell-Robinson, Shafer, Stephens, Tylee.

artists who posed the same possibility.⁸² Miller even used the theme in a 1945 short story, “One Blue Star,” published in *Opportunity*. Yet Miller’s unique take on the issue in *Stragglers in the Dust* incorporates white characters (a technique she uses several times in her plays) and becomes the only text to dramatize the issue and put the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on the stage.

By placing the monument as the central fixture of the stage, *Stragglers in the Dust* focuses on memorialization of the Great War. It questions who is entitled to participate in such commemoration and, by extension, who qualifies as “American.” Thus, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery is not simply an unusual backdrop for the play; it becomes a behavioral vortex where issues of identity and history play out. Kurt Piehler, expert on America’s commemoration of war, writes that with such monuments the United States government “hoped to camouflage the divisions caused by the war...National leaders wanted desperately to define an American identity that supplanted class, ethnic, and sectional loyalties” (Piehler 93-94). Thus, the smooth marble of the monument was meant to smooth out the ruptures and disagreements within the American population. Yet, as Joseph Roach notes, “Memory is a process that depends crucially on forgetting” (2). While Roach describes “forgetting” as a healthy, necessary step in a community’s generational shifts, I see a different sort of “forgetting” being highlighted in *Stragglers in the Dust*. Here, Miller points out that the monument serves to consciously suppress (if not repress) African Americans’ central role not only in America’s fight for democracy in World War I, but also in the nation. The primary purpose of the play is to bring to light those aspects of American identity and history the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier attempts to erase. Yet it does so with its own form of meta-forgetting: through the play’s genteel

⁸² Whalan cites James Weldon Johnson’s 1930 poem “Saint Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day” (dedicated to the African American Gold Star Mothers), Edward S. Silvera’s 1927 poem “The Unknown Soldier,” and John Dos Passos’s 1932 novel *1919*.

form, *Stragglers in the Dust* attempts to hide its political subtext and brings the issue of the legacy of the Great War to the forefront without an open appeal.

On the surface, however, the play is all about the continuation of memory. For Nan, her place of work gives her a connection to her dead son. She admits, “Ah’s always kinda had a hankering after graveyards and now--...since he’s been heah Ah jus’ kinda likes tuh stay neah” (146).⁸³ Her physical proximity to where she believes her son’s body lies gives her comfort and helps her stay connected to her offspring. Mac, however, does not understand what Nan is talking about and asks whether her son works at the cemetery. Nan responds,

Dey put him in dat marble box dere aftah dey fin’ him on de field. Flanders, Ah think dey calls it...ain’t yuh hear’d dem talkin’ ‘bout him de uhda day? Dat grand ol’ man stand up dere an’ tol’ how dey call’d an’ how Jim lef’ me broken hearted tuh go fight for dis country an’ den how dem guns got him. An’ how dey fin’ him finally on dat fiel’ in France an’ bring him back ober heah an put him in dere.

(She points again to the tomb.) (italics original 146)

Nan’s retelling involves several layers of memory. First, she recounts the speech she heard the day the Unknown Soldier was interred; the “grand ol’ man” she references could be President

⁸³ Nan’s language is worthy of comment here. All of her lines are in a marked Southern dialect, which was not uncommon in Harlem Renaissance drama, but which was out of place with Miller’s general opinion of dialect. When asked about language in schools she stated, “In order to compete in the mainstream, one must speak the accepted language” (qtd. in *Roses* 237). Yet Nan’s dialect serves a purpose; it sets up Nan as an “old Negro” who speaks in the old dialect, in contrast to the “New Negro” who would speak Standard American English. This is perhaps an attempt on Miller’s part to appeal to audiences who would see the play; Nan’s “old Negro” dialect tempers the radical message underlying the play. Additionally, Nan’s Southern dialect might indicate that she was a participant in the Great Migration, the relocation of more than 400,000 African Americans from the South to the North that was spurred by the need for fresh labor in the North due to World War I (Levine 144). While the play gives no explicit reference to where Nan was born or whether she migrated to Washington D.C. because of jobs opened up by the war, her language is possibly one more nod to the Great War in Miller’s play.

Harding, who spoke at the interment and declared that it did not matter whether the Unknown Soldier was a “native or adopted son” or from a “mansion or cottage” because all “sacrificed alike” (qtd. in Piehler 120). Embedded in that speech are other memories: of soldiers going off to war, of death on the battlefield, of the recovery of bodies in France, and of the building of the monument. Yet, Nan also inserts her personal memories into the generic speech. Where the address was presumably extolling the virtues of young men who left their mothers for the good of the country, Nan substitutes her son and herself: “how Jim lef’ me broken hearted.” This “repetition with a signal difference” (Gates xxiv) exemplifies Henry Louis Gates’s notion of “Signifyin(g)” as a key component of African American literature. Similarly, Nan’s lines mirror Roach’s theory of displaced transmission, a process through which memory is altered at each utterance: “no action or sequence of actions may be performed exactly the same way twice; they must be reinvented or recreated at each appearance. In this improvisational behavioral space, memory reveals itself as imagination” (Roach 29). Mac takes this notion of memory being “imagination” literally; he thinks Nan has too vivid an imagination and tells her, “they weren’t talking ‘bout your Jim. Why they don’t even know who that soldier is—he’s unknown.” She replies, “Yeah, Ah know some of dem don’ know; but Ah knows an’ dat man knows. Didn’t he say ‘Yuh mother dere bow’d in grief.’ Ah was hidin’ behin’ dis very pillow an’ Ah heah’d him” (146-47). Nan’s understanding of the speech is comic as she mistakes the metaphoric language of the speech for a literal description of the Unknown Soldier’s mother. Yet the “mistake” is another example of displaced transmission, where “popular behaviors,” such as public speeches, are given new meaning through retelling (Roach 28). Nan seems to view the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier as a personal monument to her loss, a structure with which she connects to keep alive her memories of her son.

While at first glance *Stragglers* presents the monument as a way to carry on memory, on a deeper level the play subtly argues that the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is really about *erasure*, about excluding certain memories and solidifying the notion that “American” equals white. With this theme, the play is a forerunner of late twentieth century theories about the monument.⁸⁴ As Mark Whalan writes,

The paradoxical notion of the body of the Unknown Soldier, which is both present and absent, involves a very particular situation; it necessitates the nation becoming symbolically embodied precisely because there is no particular and recognizable body there at all. In such a position, the Unknown Soldier becomes everybody and nobody. Yet it is a particularly selective ‘everybody,’ a body that excludes the participation of non Anglo-Saxon soldiers of the AEF in the conflict and, in a wider sense, excludes them from the category of ‘American.’ (193)

Anderson’s notion of the nation as an “imagined community” becomes literalized here; the body inside the tomb becomes the central point of “embodiment” of the nation, an object that is both “present and absent” around which the nation can imagine itself. Yet, Whalan notes that through the tomb the nation imagines the body (and thus itself) as white, and it is this theme that *Stragglers in the Dust* strives to subtly illuminate. It articulates this message through the genteel tradition, a style that was committed to an integrationist protest against African American “exclusion from the American mainstream” (Bruce). To focus on African Americans’ “exclusion” from the Tomb of the Unknown (and hence the American body politic) in the midst of the early Depression also reverberates with contemporary African Americans’ concern over the widespread practice of replacing African Americans with white workers as the Crash started

⁸⁴ See also Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, pg. 105.

to affect American businesses (Greenberg 25). In this way, Miller's play not only speaks to issues of the Great War and its legacy in America, it also begins to address the widespread practice of defining "American" as "white" in all areas of post-war American life.

The history of Arlington National Cemetery, no doubt familiar to Miller (a resident of Washington D.C. for most of her life), has important ties to this theme of erasure in *Stragglers in the Dust*. The cemetery began as a 1,100-acre plantation, complete with an expansive mansion and dozens of slaves. The Arlington House, built by George Washington Parke Custis in 1802, was eventually passed to Mary Anna Custis Lee, wife of Robert E. Lee. The famous General of the Confederate Army served as the custodian of the plantation from 1857-1861. In that year, federal troops occupied the house and the Lees fled. The Federal government confiscated the plantation in 1864 because of a tax dispute and quickly established the cemetery with the purpose of making the house uninhabitable if the Lees ever desired to return (U.S. Army 1-4). Throughout this time, the slaves belonging to the plantation continued to live and work there, although Lee officially freed them on December 29, 1862. In 1863 the Federal government used some of the property to create Freedman's Village, a community for freed and escaped slaves. More than three thousand of the villagers are buried in the national cemetery grounds, even though the village was eventually removed (Dieterle 44). After Lee's death in 1870, his son George Washington Custis Lee sued the Federal government and claimed the plantation had been illegally confiscated. His case prevailed, and Congress ultimately bought the property from him and continued to use the land as a national cemetery (Nelligan 26).

Yet the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier attempts to erase the volatile history of the land it sits upon—fraught with slavery, violent occupations, legal disputes, and a bitter civil war—in favor of presenting a unified nation. The monument "involves a drive toward unification and

homogenization that entails as much forgetting as remembering” (Whalan 192), and it discloses none of this history; all mentions of slavery on the original plantation have been “whitewashed.” The monument in *Stragglers in the Dust*, however, points out that total erasure is impossible. The troubled legacy of slavery, for example, can be seen in Nan’s current status as a “charwoman,” a woman hired to do odd jobs around the house (Oxford English Dictionary). As an African American woman trying to make a living during the Depression, Nan faces the “double burden” of race and gender discrimination:

To their lot, therefore, have fallen the more menial jobs, the lower paid, the more hazardous—in general, the least agreeable and desirable. And one of the tragedies of the depression was the realization that the unsteady foothold Negro women had attained in even these jobs was lost when great numbers of unemployed workers from other fields clamored for employment. (Greenberg 136)

Nan’s precarious “foothold” in the job market, as an African American female in the early Depression, echoes the situation of the domestic servants of the Custis Lee plantation, although she does get paid (presumably little) for her labor. This similarity shows that, while slavery was abolished in 1865, its legacy continues to haunt American society—one of its forms being the limited types of jobs and the inferior pay scales available to African American men and women in the early years of the Great Depression.

One can also see slavery’s haunting legacy in Nan’s first exchange with Mac. This emphasis on ghosts (metaphorical here, in terms of slavery “haunting” the text), connects to Marvin Carlson’s theory of ghosting in the theatre. He argues that theatre is the “respository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts”

(Carlson 2). Just this sort of “adjustment” takes place in the dialogue between Mac and Nan. He tells her it’s closing time, and she replies, “Yes, Mistah Mac, Ah’s just ‘bout done. Ah’s rubb’d and rubb’d all dat brass bright enough to make heavenly crowns.” Mac answers, “To be sure might nice things look nice [sic] Nan, but I doubt if I’d be wantin’ any brass crown.” “No Ah guess not,” Nan replies, “there’s still some of us what’s deservin’ of better. We done tasted the brass here on earth. God sartinly must be a savin’ de gold” (146). Nan’s lines mirror the Christian trope of suffering on earth leading to heavenly rewards, and Nan’s “we” could encompass all Christians. Her choice of words also invokes a common theme rooted in the African American cultural tradition: the use of a Christian framework to discuss bondage and freedom. In this sense, Nan’s “we” could refer to African Americans; “we done tasted the brass here on earth” could indicate the horrors of slavery (perhaps the literal taste of the metal bit) and the pain of neo-slavery, with a faith in an eventual deliverance. Perhaps less directly, but interesting because of the controversy over the treatment of African American Gold Star Mothers in 1930, the lines also conjure images of that Gold Star Pilgrimage; Nan and the other African American Gold Star Mothers “deserv[ed] better” than the “brass”-level treatment afforded them by the United States government. Similarly, the “we” could reference African Americans in the Great Depression, who faced the brunt of the economic crash and an increase in race-motivated violence (McElvaine 187). All of these readings of Nan’s lines, haunted by America’s troubled legacy with slavery and its aftermath, reinforce the notion that the monument, while it might attempt to camouflage the divisive history of the ground on which it sits, cannot help but let its ghosts be heard.

The particular nature of the cemetery also highlights the theme of erasure and ghosting in *Stragglers*. Roach writes that cemeteries are behavioral vortices, a “kind of spatially induced

carnival, a center of cultural self-invention through the restoration of behavior” (28). The presentation of Arlington National Cemetery in the play certainly fits this description; it is a topsy-turvy space, one where the line between the living and the dead seems to have vanished. The Straggler character, the “shadowy figure” (145) who has a “deathlike pallor” and “a slight tremor of limbs,” exemplifies this notion. At one point the stage directions call him the “unknown” (149), a reference to his status as a stranger to the cemetery workers, but also as an eerie doubling of the corpse lying in the Tomb. During Mac and Bradford’s confrontation with the Straggler, the veteran himself intimates the living presence of the dead in the vortex of the cemetery. He speaks of the black Unknown Soldier as if he was alive. His father interrupts, “But son you said he was dead.” The Straggler answers, “Sure he’s dead but I’ve talked to him and even Niggers learn sense after death. He only stays there from evening ‘til dawn. The rest of the time he spends at the Capitol. He says it’s lots of fun to come back and see what foolish things big men say and do” (150). In the behavioral vortex of the cemetery, the living and the dead converse and the (dead) Unknown Soldier makes day trips to Capitol Hill. Even at the end of the play, after the Straggler has collapsed in his attempt to enter the monument, the play blurs the line between life and death. As the Straggler’s body turns cold on the marble steps, the stage directions note: “At the tomb the soldier keeps his silent vigil” (152). In one sense, the “soldier” is the sentry, the honorary guardian of the Tomb first appointed by the Army in 1926 (Piehler 122). This interpretation implies that the everyday duties of the sentry (and Nan, Mac, and others who work in the cemetery) will go on despite these bizarre happenings, business as usual. On another level, however, the “soldier” is the Straggler, a once active combatant who is now “silent” in death. Because the Straggler had been watching the Tomb, waiting for the black soldier to return, the phrase “keeps his silent vigil” adds an eerie sense of the blurred line

between life and death in the cemetery. Through this literal “ghosting,” *Stragglers* participates in what Carlson defines as theatre being “a cultural activity deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition” (11). The presentation of the Straggler and the African American soldier’s ghost participates in a genteel, subtle conversation about the place of African Americans in the “repository of [American] cultural memory” (Carlson 2).

Although this crumbling barrier between the living and the dead seems to indicate the possibility of change or progress, the cemetery as a behavioral vortex actually solidifies traditional formulations of identity. In this way, the set takes part in the “forgetting” that *Stragglers in the Dust* suggests is implicit in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Roach, writing about behavioral vortices, notes that “although such a zone or district seems to offer a place for transgression, for things that couldn’t happen otherwise or elsewhere, in fact what it provides is far more official: a place in which everyday practices and attitudes may be legitimated” (28). The cemetery in *Stragglers* can be seen as exactly this sort of “official” place, an area where the racism of the white characters, specifically the Straggler, is sanctioned. The Straggler consistently calls the African American soldier in the Tomb “Nigger.” He also expresses indignation that he seems to be indebted to such a person:

You see I met him in No man’s land. It was just a few minutes after one of those infernal German shells had exploded near me. I was standing there a little dazed when he came to save me—did you hear—to save me, I said. (*He laughs harshly*)
 He was such a huge black one and it was so easy for him to carry me. We had gone some distance when he missed his gun and went back. A shell got him.
 (150)

Taken on their own, the Straggler’s lines could be read as a nostalgic memory, an elegy for the

humanity, strength, and heroism of the African American soldier. When the speech is considered with the rest of the Straggler's lines, however, his bigotry becomes apparent. The Straggler's disbelief that an African American would think *he* needed saving, shown by the repetition of "to save me" and his "harsh," sarcastic laughter, highlights the veteran's racism. Yet his story does show the heroism of an African American combatant, much like African American World War I drama of the 1920s. The image of the African American soldier as a savior, however, is quickly cut down by the Straggler's association of African American males with less-than-human animals: the Straggler calls his hero a "huge black one," much as one would describe an ox. When his father expresses sadness that the man perished, saying "poor lad," the Straggler exclaims, "Lucky lad! Didn't they go right to that spot to get him" (150). The Straggler believes that he would have been hit by the fatal shell and his body chosen for interment in the Tomb if the African American soldier had not intervened. This sense of having been replaced by the racial Other leads to anger: "a black Nigger...stole my place. (*He becomes violent in his expression*) He caught the shell aimed at me. He holds the tomb meant for me!" (italics original 150). The Straggler's anger has its roots in fear of racial surrogation; he is angry that the socially marginal African American male occupies such a central position (the Tomb) in the imagined community of the nation. The fact that margin has become center points out the "myth of [national] coherence" (Roach 39); the white characters' notion of American equaling whiteness is in danger of being exposed as a myth. Yet, ironically, the Tomb is an empty center. As *Stragglers in the Dust* shows, the marble smoothness of the monument covers over all of these ruptures in an effort to present a unified nation.

The other white characters' reactions to Nan's claims of an African American Unknown Soldier also highlight the exclusion of African Americans from the Tomb and, consequently, any

notions of their being truly “American.” When Mac and Bradford first discuss the Unknown Soldier, Bradford comments, “He undoubtedly has had an unexplainable effect on the whole white race.” Mac corrects him, “No sir, you needn’t make it that narrow. Better say on all races. You’d be surprised at the number of Negroes that visit here.” “For what? Out of patriotism?” Bradford jokes (148). His comment, said while he “smiles at his own irony,” is the first indication that Bradford does not define African Americans as Americans, much as the scores of white Americans who protested for white-first hiring practices during the Great Depression (McElvaine 187) did not see blacks as being fully American. Even though he is linked thematically to Nan (both have lost sons to the war, either through shell shock or death), the play highlights how the two are “united by experience but divided by class and race” (Stephens 107). The idea that African Americans would be patriotic is amusing to Bradford, presumably because he thinks the group is incapable of holding such lofty virtues. Another possibility is that Bradford recognizes the irony of African Americans showing loyalty to a nation that shows them none (especially in light of the economic crisis, when African Americans were hardest hit). His next comments, however, make such an insightful interpretation unlikely. Mac tells him Nan believes the Unknown is her son. Bradford spits out, “But how could she think that?...Such a thing has never even crossed my mind. Why that isn’t even possible.” “Of course not,” Mac replies, “Nan’s just a poor colored woman with nothing left but her dreams” (148). Despite Mac’s initial attempt to include African Americans in the “imagined community” of the nation (by first emphasizing “all races”), he quickly comes to the same conclusion as Bradford and agrees that an African American soldier in the Tomb is nothing more than a “colored woman[’s]” fantasy—it “isn’t even possible.”

As the lone Irish character in the play, Mac’s reaction is noteworthy. His presentation

complicates the black and white binary set up by the other characters. During the years of heavy Irish immigration to United States (1820-1860), Irish Americans were often considered non-white, according to leading whiteness historian David Roediger: “Nativist folk wisdom held that an Irishman was a ‘nigger,’ inside out” (133). Thus, Irish immigrants were “subjected to prejudice, discrimination, and bitter hostility by many Americans for their Irish background or Catholic faith or, more often, both” (Meagher 221). Yet, there is ample evidence of large numbers of Irish Americans embracing similar stances of discrimination toward African Americans and Asians (Meagher 218). For instance, in 1850 New York City elections, the Irish “reportedly went to the polls shouting not only ‘Down with the Nagurs!’ but also ‘Let them go back to Africa, where they belong’” (Roediger 136). Timothy Meagher, scholar of Irish American history, helps explain such behavior: “The Irish were not trying to become white—they were fighting to prevent the elevation of nonwhites to a new status that would render whiteness and its resources and privileges irrelevant” (223). Thus, Irish American espousal of white supremacy became a way to police racial boundaries in an attempt to gain economic power. Irish Americans’ experiences differed, of course, depending on the part of the United States and the time period (Meagher 221). Yet by the 1930s, when readers meet Mac, Irish Americans had overwhelmingly gained “acceptance as whites among the larger American population” (Roediger 137). The benefit of such a status was clear: “The imperative to define themselves as white came from the particular ‘public and psychological wages’ whiteness offered to a desperate rural and often preindustrial Irish population coming to labor in industrializing American cities” (Roediger 137). While Mac does not have a direct connection to the “whitening” of his Irish immigrant ancestors, this complicated history is reflected in *Stragglers*. For much of the play, Mac seems to be not white but not black—a figure who can go

between. He ties together characters of different race and class identities, such as Nan and Bradford. This status as an in-between character creates a mirror of antebellum categorization of Irish immigrants. Yet ultimately, with his quick “of course not,” Mac denies the legitimacy of Nan’s claim to the Tomb. He aligns with Bradford and chooses solidarity with the white majority rather than the racial Other, a stance that mirrors the policing of whiteness that characterizes the story of Irish assimilation into American culture and echoes the denial of African Americans’ status as true Americans inherent in the early Depression riots demanding blacks be fired to open up jobs for whites (McElvaine 187).

Thus, despite Mac’s brief status as not white/not black, the men’s conversation ultimately reveals that their version of the nation is clearly imagined as white. Any other configuration “isn’t even possible.” The characters’ feelings reflect the mainstream attitudes of the time:

Few white southerners or northerners, certainly few surviving Confederate soldiers, conceived of the Unknown Soldier as being nonwhite. When imagining the Unknown Soldier’s origins, no speech suggested that he might have come from a black sharecropper’s cabin or from Harlem. Several years later, when the Jewish Welfare Board learned that a proposed monument for the Unknown Soldier’s tomb contained a cross, they had to remind the Commission of Fine Arts that this anonymous individual may well have been a Jew. (Piehler 121)

The nation’s widespread refusal to conceptualize the Unknown Soldier as nonwhite and non-Christian is clearly illogical; it *was* “possible” for the Unknown Soldier to have been African American, or Jewish, or any of the many ethnic groups who participated in the American Expeditionary Forces. Yet the white characters’ concept of America is dependent on erasing such possibilities.

For example, when the men (even jokingly) acknowledge the prospect of a non-white Unknown Soldier, it deeply threatens their seemingly coherent national identities. Bradford ends the conversation about Nan's son by adding, "But if it were—what a terrible joke on America!" (148). His statement is striking; it briefly acknowledges the *possibility* of an Unknown Soldier of a different race, but his "joke" does so with fear. It would be a "terrible" prank, one that would rip apart mainstream boundaries of (white) American identity, a possibility that is almost unspeakable, signaled by Bradford's halting speech. Joseph Roach's discussion of circum-Atlantic identity formation, which focuses on the Atlantic connection between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, helps explain why the white characters are so threatened:

As death and its rituals offer occasions to mark and question the boundaries of circum-Atlantic identities, so miscegenation and its representation enact the fears of some that the artifice of those boundaries will collapse. That is, no doubt, why death so frequently seals off such liaisons with sacrificial violence. But death and miscegenation also enact a deeper terror that lurks at the heart of surrogation as a cultural process: the fear of being replaced, a fear that plays itself out in tropes of monstrosity. (112)

While *Stragglers* is not specific to circum-Atlantic identities and has no literal miscegenation, Roach's theory still helps illuminate the men's fear. The possibility of a black unknown soldier in the Tomb is miscegenation of the *body politic*, the "imagined community" the men have envisioned as white. This notion explains Bradford's "terrible joke on America" comment; he expresses a fear of being replaced by the racial Other and feels that the boundaries he uses to define his world might collapse. Ultimately, it would be unthinkable, "monstrous," to have a black body inside the Tomb/womb of the body politic. The white male characters' comments

about the chance of a non-white Unknown Soldier illuminate *Straggler's* main point: the Tomb attempts to exclude African Americans from memories of the war (and henceforth from the category of "American"), yet underneath the marble smoothness and the men's denials, a fear of the racial Other permeates the nation.

Ultimately, *Stragglers in the Dust* is similar to the 1920s African American World War I plays: like Cotter's and Edmonds's texts, Miller's drama also argues for a remembering of African American experiences and histories that dominant narratives would rather leave out. A major difference between the plays, however, is that Miller's 1930 drama focuses on the war being waged on the home front and includes female characters. It emphasizes the actual monuments commemorating the war and the memories those statues and tombs are perpetuating and "forgetting." In this sense, the title of the play can have many meanings. Most clearly, it refers to the white shell-shocked veteran, the "Straggler," who is left behind on the battlefield and upon the Tomb's steps. The title also refers to those "ghostly *national* imaginings" Benedict Anderson argues are implicit in Tombs of the Unknown (9). In this sense, the "stragglers" of the title are the focus of the non-dominant memories and histories that haunt the Tomb and the nation. These include the African American soldiers who died in the Great War but also the thousands of freed and escaped slaves buried in unmarked graves in Arlington National Cemetery (and perhaps even the African Americans slipping through the cracks as the Depression worsened). Similarly, Nan, as a Gold Star Mother, has been "left in the dust"; her character is erased from the drama early on and one never hears from her again (although her assertion of a black Unknown Soldier permeates the dialogue of the men). Her character is symbolic of the erasure of African American women from the mainstream commemoration of the Great War, most clearly evident in the African American Gold Star Mothers' segregation.

Yet, just as Nan haunts the dialogue of the white men and the *Defender* cartoon presents an African American Gold Star Mother who remains on the national stage, *Stragglers in the Dust* shows that total erasure is impossible. Through its genteel style, a form that opposed African American exclusion from the mainstream yet did not make social critique or protest overt, Miller's play shows that, as much as National leaders "hoped to camouflage the divisions caused by war" (and I would add, centuries of oppression) with the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the "ghosts" of racism would continue to haunt the national conscience.

A History That Will Not Die: Langston Hughes's "The Colored Soldier"

The second late Harlem Renaissance and early-Depression African American text that centers on ghosts of World War I is Langston Hughes's 1931 dramatic recitation "The Colored Soldier." The text has an unusual structure, with an opening exposition and two columns running throughout the piece. In the left column, titled "The Mood," are stage directions indicating the speaker's tone, movements, and emotions. In the right column, titled "The Poem," is the text. In the piece, a young African American veteran tells of his and his brother's enlistment in the armed forces and their hope that joining the fight would erase the color line in America. The speaker survived the conflict; his brother did not and is buried in a military cemetery in France. The young man describes a dream in which his brother returns to speak with him. As he recounts the dream, his voice becomes the dead brother's. The ghostly presence recalls the stifling prejudice of Jim Crow in America while he was alive and then expresses certainty that all has been rectified: "Cause that's what I died for—isn't it, Brother?" (2).⁸⁵ The young man, answering his brother, cries out that the rhetoric of democracy was a sham and that Jim Crow lives on,

⁸⁵ All quotes from "The Colored Soldier" taken from *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations*. 1931. Salem, NH: Ayer, 1971.

stronger than before the war. He finishes his monologue by expressing a bitter happiness that all of the African American soldiers who died in the conflict do not know the futility of their deaths; the “dream,” the young veteran’s literal dream and the African American community’s dream of improved race relations based on participation in the Great War, has ended.

Because of the text’s unusual format, it is important to address the validity of including it in this study of Great War *drama*. Technically a poem but including dramatic elements such as lighting, music, and stage directions, “The Colored Soldier” straddles the line between genres.⁸⁶ This ambiguity has sparked a lively debate among scholars about how to classify the text in terms of Hughes’s other writing. On the one hand, Greg Jones and Nadia Nurhussein argue that “The Colored Soldier,” despite its dramatic flourishes, is clearly poetry. For example, Jones argues that with its “blending of music, directions, and poetic text” “The Colored Soldier” becomes a “modernist hybrid,” but one “that still remains squarely within the realm of poetry” (83). Similarly, Nurhussein contends that the stage directions, rather than directing a performer, “in effect become parallel poems themselves, running alongside the poems proper, with the two texts using interdependent parallel readings” (118). She focuses on stage directions that would be difficult to realize in performance, such as the note that the speaker “sadly recalls the rows of white crosses in France” (Hughes 3), and argues that “The Mood,” the stage directions running down the left side of the text, is literary, not performance oriented: “Because the directions contain information impossible to relay in performance, ‘The Mood’ is only really accessible to readers, and *The Negro Mother* [the book of dramatic recitations which “The Colored Soldier” begins] is designed really for silent reading and not performance” (129). While Nurhussein is

⁸⁶ In this way, the formally conservative poem has connections to Hughes’s later modernist play, his 1938 *Don’t You Want to Be Free*, which also experiments with blurring the line between poetry and drama.

correct that some of the stage directions would not be applicable to performance (I count three such instances), her contention that their inclusion negates the text's dramatic potential ignores the instances of such stage directions in African American plays of the period. For example, Eulalie Spence, recognized as the "best craftswoman" of African American dramatists of the time (Hatch 197), includes just those sort of stage directions in her 1929 *Undertow*, as does Marita Bonner in her expressionistic 1928 *The Purple Flower*, May Miller in her 1930 *Stragglers in the Dust*, and Shirley Graham in her 1932 *Tom-Tom*. Additionally, the majority of the information provided in "The Mood" and the opening note are explicitly performance based. For example, at the beginning of the piece they instruct that a performer should "calmly tell the story. Proudly and expectantly with head up, shoulders back" (Hughes 2). Later, the speaker gives a "half-sob and bowing his head in shame, becomes suddenly fierce and angry" (Hughes 3). Each of these provides clear, achievable instructions for a performer.

Presenting an alternative view to Jones and Nurhussein are Elizabeth Davey and Leslie Sanders, scholars who emphasize "The Colored Soldier's" dramatic elements and Hughes's intentions for the work to be performed. Davey notes,

The distinctly dramatic presentation of the poems of *The Negro Mother* suggests that Hughes thought that a mass black audience for black literature would be built through public readings, rather than the private consumption of books. Even after his tour ended, by using *The Negro Mother* as a script, Hughes's readers could continue to nurture audiences in economically and educationally marginalized black communities. (224)

This notion of *The Negro Mother* becoming a "script" indicates that the dramatic elements of the text go beyond the initial book tour reading, and that part of the book's appeal was its potential

for expanding the repertoire of small-scale performances put on at schools, churches, or social clubs. Hughes was no stranger to this sort of performance; in his first autobiography, *The Big Sea*, he tells of his mother's dramatic recitations at community functions. In one, "The Mother of the Gracchi," she dressed Hughes and another boy in sheets to act as Cornelia's sons:

My mother was the star of the program and the church in Lawrence was crowded. The audience hung on her words; but I did not like the poem at all, so in the very middle of it I began to roll my eyes from side to side, round and round in my head, as though in great distress. The audience tittered. My mother intensified her efforts, I, my mock agony. Wilder and wilder I mugged, as the poem mounted, batted and rolled my eyes, until the entire assemblage burst into uncontrollable laughter. (Hughes *The Big Sea* 25)

While Hughes's antics were reportedly rewarded with the worst whipping he ever got in his life, the anecdote shows that he saw and had been a part of dramatic recitations in the African American community from an early age. These experiences no doubt influenced his later choice to write "The Colored Soldier" and other pieces in *The Negro Mother* as dramatic monologues.

Leslie Sanders also focuses on the dramatic aspects of the texts in *The Negro Mother*. She notes that "included in the volume are marginal notes for dramatic recitation instructing that each poem be read to music and in appropriate costume. Thus, by 1931, Hughes had begun to realize the dramatic potential of the poetry reading, a medium he would later develop into a complex dramatic form" (95). This development can best be seen in his 1938 "Poetry Play" *Don't You Want to Be Free*, which includes the 1931 poem "The Negro Mother."

I obviously tend to fall more on the side of Davey and Sanders in seeing the "The Colored Soldier" as a hybrid form intended for performance. Hughes's correspondence about the

text suggests such a reading. In an October 14, 1931 letter to Prentiss Taylor,⁸⁷ Hughes explains his reasons for wanting to publish the book:

In recent Negro poetry, I have felt that there has been a distinct lack of rhymed poems dramatizing current racial interest in simple, understandable verse, pleasing to the ear, and suitable for reading aloud, or for recitation in schools, churches, lodges, etc. I have felt that much of our poetry has been aimed at the heads of the high-brows, rather than at the hearts of the people. And we all know that most Negro books published by white publishers are advertised and sold largely to white readers, and little or no effort is made to reach the great masses of the colored people. (Hughes 14 Oct. 1931)

While Hughes lists several reasons for his new book of verse, including the need for African American writing to reach a broader audience than intellectuals and whites, he underscores the importance of performance (“reading aloud” and “recitation”) as a way to reach the “great masses of colored people,” the main goal in Hughes’s writing career according to Rampersad (103). Also playing into this goal are the locations for performances Hughes indicates: “schools, churches, lodges, etc.” The intent is not to have his recitations performed at commercial theatres, but to provide the African American community with material for their educational, religious, and social programs.⁸⁸ A study of the original drafts of the poem also suggests that Hughes intended “The Colored Soldier” to be performed. In an undated, corrected draft, a note at the beginning of the poem reads: “A dramatic recitation to be done in the half-dark by a young

⁸⁷ Taylor was the white artist who illustrated *The Negro Mother*. For more on Taylor, see page 146.

⁸⁸ It is important to note here that while Hughes makes it clear he does not want to participate in the white dominated world of commercial theatre, as a writer who lived off of royalties and commissions, he *was* interested in making money off of the sale of his book.

brown fellow... Martial music on a piano, or by an orchestra, may accompany the recitation” (“The Colored”). Here we have directions for the lighting, casting, and sound effects of a performance. The inclusion of these details shows that from the beginning Hughes was thinking of the text as a dramatic recitation, a text meant to be performed by and for the African American community. In this way, “The Colored Soldier’s” emphasis on performance fits into Hughes’s lifelong quest to disseminate his writing to the African American *people* (not just the upper class who could afford to buy books or subscribe to journals) (Rampersad 103).

While scholarship tends to focus on the place of “The Colored Soldier” in terms of genre and Hughes’s other writing, it is also illuminating to analyze the text in terms of World War I: why would Hughes write a dramatic recitation based on the Great War in 1931, *thirteen years* after the conflict was over, and in the middle of the crumbling U.S. economic system? Arnold Rampersad notes that Hughes’s World War I text was responding to its specific social and historical context. By 1931, the “defiant spirit” of Hughes’s 1926 “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” was muted: “Langston was altering his aesthetic to accommodate the social reality. Unlike most white artists, however, he faced a paradox: to reach the black masses, his writing had to be not radical but genteel, not aggressive but uplifting and sentimental” (Rampersad 221).⁸⁹ Mark Whalan, author of the groundbreaking monograph *The Great War and*

⁸⁹ This “genteel,” “sentimental” style seems at odds with Hughes’s most well-known work up to that point, but James Smethurst notes that during the early 1930s, Hughes published at least three different styles of writing, each intended for distinctive audiences. One is his “literary,” “modernist” writing, such as the poems in *Dear Lovely Death* (1932). Another is his “revolutionary” writing, such as *Scottsboro Limited* (1931). The third he calls Hughes’s “African American uplift,” and it is in this category of “formally conservative poems of black pride and perseverance” that he places “The Colored Soldier” (Smethurst 142-43). In a 1931 letter to Prentiss Taylor explaining the reasons for publishing *The Negro Mother*, Hughes writes, “In many cases the context, too, of Negro books has been uninteresting or displeasing to a large part of the race. They have not cared for jazz poetry or low-down novels—and one can’t blame them much—since they usually know such things all too well in life” (“Letter” 14 Oct. 1931). By

the Culture of the New Negro, acknowledges the genteel aspect of “The Colored Soldier,” but he also argues that the poem is as radical as Hughes’s revolutionary poetry and drama: “Although this ‘sentimental’ style typifies ‘The Colored Soldier,’ it nonetheless advances a politics that scorns the likelihood of African Americans ‘winning’ civil rights from either of the main political parties through displays of national service” (Whalan 216).⁹⁰ This point furthers our understanding of the text considerably; rather than being simply a formally conservative, genteel poem, “The Colored Soldier,” with its emphasis on the effects of economic catastrophe intertwined with rampant Jim Crow practices, uses the backdrop of World War I to launch a “critique of nationalist sentiment” (Whalan 221). To take Whalan’s analysis further, I would add that Hughes’s mix of the genteel tradition with a radical message presents a subtle condemnation of ethnic nationalism, and in this way it moves beyond concerns about the Great War and starts to explore issues pertaining to the rise of a second World War, namely fascism, all while maintaining a light hand that would not offend Hughes’s uncertain, fearful Depression-era audience.

The text’s first veiled critique is made against Jim Crow laws and customs. When the protagonist starts to recall a dream he had the previous night featuring his late brother, the narrative slips into the dead soldier’s words. The ghost says that when he was alive in the United States:

avoiding “jazz” and “low-down” subjects, Hughes tries to reach the often-conservative black masses, people who might not have been fans of his blues poetry.

⁹⁰ According to Hughes scholar Maryemma Graham, this dual focus was not foreign to Hughes. She writes that he “used simple popular styles to convey social content. Hughes’ fiction represents a special kind of fusion of traditional artistic expression and radical social and political ideas” (220). While Graham focuses on Hughes’s fiction, the notion that he often uses a traditional form to convey radical content aptly describes what is happening in “The Colored Soldier.”

Black boys couldn't work then anywhere like they can today,
 Could hardly find a job that offered decent pay.
 The unions barred us; the factories too,
 But now I know we've got plenty to do.
 We couldn't eat in restaurants; had Jim Crow cars;
 Didn't have any schools; and there were all sorts of bars
 To a colored boy's rising in wealth or station—
 But now I know well that's not our situation:
 The world's been made safe for Democracy. (2)

The brother gives those lines “with his face full of light and faith, confident that a new world has been made” (2). He envisions a world where African Americans can find adequate employment, join unions, eat at public establishments, take equal public transportation, and pursue educations that will further their dreams of the future. Yet the protagonist, as well as audience members and readers, knows this is not the case. In fact, the Great Depression gripping the country in 1931 had tightened the noose of racial discrimination and significantly escalated racist violence against African Americans (Greenberg 78).⁹¹ Thus, the spectators' understanding of the brother's lines is completely ironic, a trait Marvin Carlson sees as a consequence of theatre's innate ghosting. Writing of the spectator, Carlson notes:

There is a certain ironic element [...] in the basic situation of being an unobserved and unparticipating observer, but the irony is much sharpened and focused when the observer, by whatever means, is put in possession of knowledge that concerns

⁹¹ Lynchings, which had steadily been decreasing in the 1920s, surged in 1930 with twenty-one lynchings, up from seven in 1929 (Greenberg 78).

the action being observed but which is not accessible to the participants. This establishes the doubled or dialectic condition necessary for irony, since ‘discrepant awareness’ itself is not sufficient; the observer must be simultaneously conscious of what the characters onstage are aware of and also the presumed more complete and incompatible or contradictory state of affairs as she understands them. (29)

In this way, the brother, a ghost himself, presents haunted, doubled speech for the Depression-era audience. His assertion, for example, that “Black boys couldn’t work then anywhere like they can today” would be met with the knowledge that in the existing economic crisis more than 38 percent of African Americans were unemployed, and the few who did find work had to struggle against overt campaigns to replace blacks with white laborers (Greenberg 21, 25). The brother’s confidence that the “unions [that] barred us” would be opened to African Americans after the war also would be met with the audience’s “more complete and incompatible” knowledge that nothing of the sort had happened; in fact, it was not until 1935 that industrial unions, represented by the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), would allow large-scale African Americans membership (Levine 164). More than twenty craft unions still excluded African Americans in that year (Greenberg 33). Hughes’s dramatic recitation also adds a twist to the irony; while Carlson emphasizes the audience’s reception of irony, “The Colored Soldier” also presents the protagonist as sharing in the irony. Both he and the audience know the realities of American life in the 1930s for African Americans, a reality of which the dead brother is (blissfully) unaware. With this irony, rather than an explicit critique or call for justice, Hughes subtly criticizes the racism infecting all aspects of American society that the ghost references: the U.S. labor force, educational system, and social order.

The publication and distribution history of “The Colored Soldier” also underscores this veiled critique. At this point in his career, Hughes had published two books of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), and one novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930). By 1931, however, his poetry “was definitely stalled” (Rampersad 160), in part because of the waning of the Harlem Renaissance. He had also suffered a painful split with his white patron, Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason, who had supported his work throughout the Renaissance. In the wake of these events, he founded the Golden Stair Press, “a small publishing house in partnership with Carl Van Vechten and Prentiss Taylor,” housed at Taylor’s home in Greenwich Village. Taylor was a young white artist who was attempting to break into the theatre design business in New York City, and Van Vechten recommended him to Hughes (Rampersad 220-21). In October of 1931, the press published *The Negro Mother* with illustrations by Taylor. Looking back at the process in 1956, Hughes wrote, “Since Prentiss Taylor was white, a Southerner from Virginia, and I, colored, I thought maybe such a book, evidence in itself of interracial collaboration and good will, might help democracy a little in the South where it seemed so hard for people to be friends across the color line” (“I Wonder” 47). On a large scale, Hughes was of course correct; the color line was still firmly entrenched in 1931; all U.S. states maintained separate public facilities for blacks and whites including schools and hospitals (Greenberg 3). Yet, the attempt at physical separation did not mean there was no interaction or collaboration between the races. George Hutchinson, in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, provides ample evidence of such cooperation during the Harlem Renaissance. Similarly, during the Great Depression white and interracial groups such as the Congress of Industrial Organizations, Catholic Worker Movement, American Jewish Congress, and the American Civil Liberties Union (among others) lent their “expertise, financial support, and public visibility” to

the cause of full African American citizenship rights (Greenberg 65). Historian Cheryl Greenberg notes that such collaborative ventures were not always immediately successful:

Constrained by racism and the threat of violence—particularly although not exclusively in the South—such engagement was often faltering and rarely threatened the basic structures underlying discrimination or segregation.

Nevertheless, political organizing on every scale provided a training ground for activists and a laboratory for tactics that would prove invaluable in the future.

(Greenberg 66).

Thus, while Hughes's venture with Taylor did not produce his most successful or widely read book (nor did it fulfill Hughes's dream of bringing true "democracy" to the South), it did showcase cooperation between white and black artists, and perhaps it paved the way for future interracial collaborations in the U.S.

To market the book and take his subtle petition against Jim Crow to the African American people, Hughes arranged a lengthy reading tour and his first visit to the South. This plan was inspired by a conversation Hughes had with Mary McLeod Bethune, president of Bethune-Cookman College and "America's leading Negro woman," according to Hughes (qtd. in Rampersad 211). In his 1956 autobiography *I Wonder As I Wander*, Hughes recalls her words:

Mrs. Bethune...said to me the night before, 'Why don't you tour the South reading your poems? Thousands of Negro students would be proud and inspired by seeing you and hearing you. You are young, but you have already made a name for yourself in literary circles, and you can help black students to feel that a Negro youth can amount to something in this world in spite of our problems.' (6)

The “problems” Bethune reportedly references are the sustained attacks on African American bodies, minds, families, businesses, etc. in Depression-era America. She explicated some of these in her 1936 speech “Closed Doors.” After describing Jim Crow cars, limited school choices for African American children, white collar jobs closed to African American workers, and “no admittance” signs on restaurants and hotels, Bethune stated, “Whether it be my religion, my aesthetic taste, my economic opportunity, my educational desire, whatever the craving is, I find a limitation” (209). The day-to-day racism Bethune discussed in her speech was also underscored by the surge in lynchings and racial violence reported in the early years of the Great Depression (Greenberg 78). Thus, although Hughes’s reading tour was motivated in part by pure marketing (as is standard, each program from the tour included a note at the bottom stating, “Books by Mr. Hughes (autographed) may be secured at close of the program” (Oct. 23, 1931 program)), his tour was also an attempt to change his society; he wanted to inspire African American youth to go beyond the confines set by economic disadvantage and Jim Crow prejudices.

This message spread far and wide in the United States. The reading tour “covered every state in the South” (Hughes “I Wonder” 47) and several others, stretching from Pennsylvania to California, with Hughes and his old friend-turned-driver Radcliffe Lucas visiting nineteen states in all. At each stop, Hughes would present a program with two sections. The first, titled “Life Makes Poems,” used his poems to trace a brief autobiography. The second half of the program, titled “Negro Dreams,” presented poems with racial themes and ended with the rousing “I, too, sing America” (“First Lecture Notes” from archive). According to the lecture notes extant in the Hughes papers, none of the dramatic recitations from *The Negro Mother* were included in the presentation. The text was the driving force, however, behind his sale of books. Hughes notes the special price he arranged for *The Negro Mother* in his 1956 autobiography: “because it was

depression times—even a dollar was a lot of money to some people—I prepared a smaller booklet of some of my newer poems to sell for a quarter” (47). The thoughtful planning proved successful; in all, *The Negro Mother* would sell over 1,700 copies and have seven printings (Rampersad 222). Within the first week of the tour Hughes’s supplies of the text had sold out, and at one point Hughes would even write to Van Vechten that copies of the book “sold like reefers on 131st street,” they sold so quickly (Rampersad 233). Thus, although there is no record that “The Colored Soldier” and the other dramatic recitations in *The Negro Mother* were performed during the reading tour, thousands of readers were exposed to the recitation through book sales, and even more potential audiences were created by the text’s availability to be used as a script. Indeed, Hughes’ already established role (by 1931) as a favorite of the African American readership makes it likely that black drama clubs and other amateur groups would have produced recitations from the book. Hughes wrote that his audiences “ranged all the way from college students to cotton pickers, from kindergarten children to the inmates of old folks homes” (“I Wonder” 55). These were conservative audiences, barred from white theatres, who wanted to be entertained. Thus, Hughes’s speaking tour (and subsequent tours of the South) filled an important void of drama written by, for, near, and about African Americans (to use Du Bois’s famous mandate for African American theatre). With this exposure to the wide variety of the African American public across the United States, the text’s veiled refutation of Jim Crow reached a wide audience.

Yet, perhaps more subtly, “The Colored Soldier” also critiques ethnic nationalism, a stance not out of line with Hughes’s “dramatic move to the far left” at the time (Rampersad 215) and in touch with the stirrings of a second World War fueled by hyper-nationalism and fascism. The rise of fascism in the 1930s did not go unnoticed by the general African American public.

Nazism's emergence in Germany in the early 1930s provoked protests by African American groups and explicit comparisons between fascism abroad and racism in the U.S.: "How could a public revolted at Nazi treatment of minority groups accept equally offensive American practices like lynching, segregation, and the exclusion of African Americans from jobs or the ballot box? [...] Change the word 'Jew' to 'Negro' and there was little to distinguish Nazi ideology from that of Jim Crow" (Greenberg 80). Similarly, African American journals, political organizations, and churches protested Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 (Greenberg 79). The issue hit close to home as well; the infamous Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi, in 1938, declared that the fascists had it right. He stated, "race consciousness is developing in all parts of the world. Consider Italy, consider Germany. It is beginning to be recognized by the thoughtful minds of our age that the conservation of racial values is the only hope for future civilization...The Germans appreciate the importance of race values" (McElvaine 191). From a twenty-first century perspective, Bilbo's closing statement is ominous and disturbing. Yet it is illuminating in terms of the reaction of different segments of the American people to fascism. It was in this atmosphere that Hughes wrote "The Colored Soldier," an indirect condemnation of ethnic nationalism and the fascism to which it could lead.

Hughes's relationship to nationalism was complex during the 1920s and 1930s. As I note in the Introduction, during the Negro Renaissance several competing views of nationalism were prevalent: the black nationalism of Marcus Garvey, the ethnic dualism of Du Bois, the cultural pluralism of Locke and Johnson, and the internationalism of socialists such as A. Philip Randolph. Anthony Dawahare, in *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature Between the Wars*, provides an astute description of Hughes's relationship to nationalism during the interwar years. He argues that a Du Boisian ethnic dualism can be seen clearly in Hughes's

writing during the 1920s. Hughes creates “a uniquely black aesthetic” with his blues poetry and his focus on the black masses while also figuring African Americans as Americans; he “compensates for the loss of an African homeland with the discovery of an African-American one” (Dawahare 56). By the 1930s, however, spurred by the Great Depression, his split from his wealthy patron, and his growing interest in the Communist Party,⁹² Hughes turns away from ethnic nationalism as a viable route to racial and class equality. Dawahare argues that Hughes “ought to be considered one of the first American poets effectively to challenge the post-World War I ethnic nationalism that informed much of the politics and literature of the Harlem Renaissance [...] as well as that which fueled European fascism” (93).

“The Colored Soldier” is a clear example of this challenge to ethnic nationalism. Whalan notes that the poem “begins to suggest that the goal of nationalist inclusion that motivated much black support for the war...may have been the wrong starting premise” (221). This theme begins with the protagonist remembering his brother’s and his own enlistment, training, and mobilization:

We were just two colored boys, brown and black,
 Who joined up to fight for the U.S.A.
 When the Nation called us that mighty day
 ...They told us America would know no black or white:
 So we marched to the front, happy to fight. (1-2)

The young man tells of this history with pride, “head up, shoulders back, and eyes shining” (2).

⁹² On the question of Hughes’s affiliation with the Communist Party, Graham notes that “Hughes had more than a literary interest in the working class. Although there is no clear evidence that he joined the Communist Party, Hughes was an early and active member of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, a united front organization which struggled for black liberation. No doubt, he understood capitalism and the necessity of extirpating its abuses” (218).

In the context of the rest of the text, which goes to great lengths to show that post-war America still differentiates between “black or white,” these lines and stage directions reflect the speaker’s naiveté. While the young recruits were told that their “brown and black” skin did not bar them from full participation in the nation, the realities of ethnic nationalism, a belief that citizens of the nation must share common ancestry, soon became apparent. The text shows that anyone who believed serving in the Great War could actually change things in the United States and that it could lead to African American males being treated as men rather than boys (the word the speaker uses repeatedly to refer to black males), has been duped by the propaganda of ethnic nationalism (referenced with the idea of being “called” by the nation).

Ethnic nationalism also is questioned by the text’s repeated references to a Christ-like sacrifice of one’s body to the greater good (in this case, the nation). The protagonist recalls that he and his brother were happy, “Thinking we were fighting for Democracy’s true reign / And that our dark blood would wipe away the stain / Of prejudice, and hate, and the false color line-- / And give us the rights that are yours and mine” (2). Here a *national* sacrifice has replaced a *religious* one; the lines echo Christ’s sacrifice of his blood to “wipe away the stain” of humankind’s sin. But the veteran specifies they were fighting for “Democracy’s true reign,” a specifically earthly, national power, not a higher power. In this sense, the state has taken the place of the deity. In comparing the black soldier’s sacrifice to Christ’s, this text mirrors earlier African American World War I drama, namely Burrill’s 1919 *Aftermath*, which elevates black soldiers to the level of Christ. Yet “The Colored Soldier,” with the mention of “dark blood,” engages with ethnic nationalism and the idea that “American” equals whiteness. By doing so the text infuses the discussion of sacrifice with deep irony; it shows that an African American, no matter what lengths to which she went, could never be “American” in terms of ethnic

nationalism. In fact, the text is explicit about the consequences of this soldier's sacrifice. At the end of the recitation, the protagonist breaks down and cries, "It's a lie! It's a lie! Every word they said, / And it's better a thousand times you're in France dead. / For here in the South there's no votes and no right. / And I'm still just a 'nigger' in America tonight" (3). The sacrifice of "dark blood" has been for nothing; the "stain" of hatred and prejudice remain. Belief in nationalistic propaganda, in its promise of unity and equality, has led nowhere, and the protagonist is still viewed as less-than-human in the country for which he fought and for which his brother gave his life.

The through-line of sacrifice is also seen in the dramatic recitation's imagery of the white crosses that serve as grave markers in American military cemeteries in France. The text mentions the crosses twice. The first instance is in the dialogue, when the protagonist states, "Last night in a dream my brother came to me / Out of his grave from over the sea, / Back from the acres of crosses in France" (2). These lines indicate the vast numbers of casualties in the Great War (there are "acres" of graves), but they also invoke a sense of the middle passage, with its journey "over the sea," another cause of massive suffering and death. For an African American in the United States in the 1930s, the lines might also call to mind the burning of crosses by the Ku Klux Klan. Both of these associations emphasize multiple wars and shift the focus away from the official "War for Democracy," and instead fix the battleground firmly on American soil. The second reference to the crosses is in "The Mood," at the very end of the recitation: the speaker "sadly recalls the rows of white crosses in France" (3). While most American families (almost seventy percent) wanted their dead sons' bodies repatriated, proponents of the military cemeteries in France "emphasized the continued service the war dead could perform for their country and for Western civilization... Each individual soldier's grave would serve as an enduring monument to

the cause of freedom for which they bled and died” (Piehler 96). This notion, that the buried soldiers were in some sense still alive and serving the country, fits well with “The Colored Soldier” and its ghostly returning soldier. It also underscores the continued commodification of African American soldiers; it is as if they can find no relief, even in death. Yet, the dramatic recitation also shows the hypocrisy of the idea that soldiers’ bodies should be used as monuments to democracy. The text states that the war was not a “cause of freedom” worthy of African American sacrifice, and it argues that the dead soldiers’ graves should not be used to promote ethnic nationalism and the false freedom proclaimed by the United States.

The religious symbolism of the white crosses also adds to “The Colored Soldier’s” anti-nationalist message. George Piehler, noted historian of American war memorials, states, “Although the cross signified the promise of resurrection in the Christian tradition, it also stood for suffering and sacrifice; by adopting it, Americans declared symbolically that the war dead had offered their lives in order to redeem the nation” (101).⁹³ In a sense, the dead brother believes this symbolism; he trusts that he died to “redeem the nation” of its racism. The protagonist, however, knows the truth. Seen from the economic devastation and increased racial tensions of the 1930s, the soldier’s sacrifice and suffering have been for nothing; there has been no “resurrection” or rebirth of America.

Another aspect of Hughes’s dramatic recitation that furthers the anti-ethnic nationalist message is the type of music accompanying the performance. The exposition notes that there should be “martial music on the piano, or by an orchestra,” perhaps “Over There,” “There’s a Rose That Grows in No-Man’s Land,” or “Joan of Arc” (Hughes 1). Whalan notes that the songs,

⁹³ Piehler notes that the United States’ emphasis on crosses as the grave markers, rather than a more uniform tombstone into which the appropriate religious marker would be carved, showed a sense of indifference to non-Christian Americans who had died in the conflict (101).

all by mainstream Euro-American composers, seem like anomalies in the context of Hughes's earlier efforts to incorporate African American cultural forms (specifically blues and jazz) into his writing. Yet, according to Marvin Carlson, theatres "have often used musical quotation [or musical ghosting] to underline the emotional impact of a particular scene or situation or, in the case of the more familiar quotations, to encourage the audience to make some cultural connection, often a parodic or ironic one, with the music" (118). This sort of ironic "musical ghosting" is exactly what Hughes invokes with the inclusion of these songs. On the surface, the music encourages patriotism by stirring up enthusiasm for the war effort and glorifying American service (in the case of "Over There" and "There's a Rose...") and sacrifice (in "Joan of Arc"). Yet, paired with the content of "The Colored Soldier," these patriotic songs take on a double meaning in the fashion of musical ghosting. For example, George M. Cohan's 1917 "Over There," the American song that exploded in popularity after the United States entered the war, proclaims, "Johnnie get your gun, get your gun, get your gun, / Take it on the run, on the run, on the run, / Hear them calling, you and me, / Every son of liberty" ("Over" 1109). When the song first came out, these lines helped solidify the notion that the nation was a natural community, a kinship every American shared, "son[s]" of the same mother. Benedict Anderson notes that it is this sort of "political love" that makes millions of people willing to die for their country (Anderson 141-43). Yet, Hughes's dramatic recitation, written well after the war and in the midst of an economic catastrophe and rising racial violence, underscores the hollowness of the song's rhetoric; the "kinship" of the nation has not been extended to African Americans, even though they heeded the call of service to their nation. In fact, if hearing or singing patriotic songs such as "Over There" creates the "physical realization of the imagined community" of the nation (Anderson 145), Hughes's "The Colored Soldier" turns that idea on its head and uses the music

to undercut such idealization of the nation. Whalan argues that these choices “reflect a harkening back to the wave of popular nationalistic hysteria that attended the outbreak of hostilities” and that with this music, “Hughes suggests that nationally constituted paradigms of identification are to be resisted rather than aspired to” (Whalan 220). I would add that the songs, as “musical ghosting,” refer back not only to the beginnings of World War I. With their ironic presentation of hyper-nationalism, the songs also reference the growing phenomenon of fascism since Hitler and Mussolini’s campaigns for power in the early 1930s were also fueled by nationalistic music (Wicke 154). Thus, just as the protagonist is literally haunted by his dead brother’s ghost, the audience is “haunted” by the specter of hyper-nationalism and fascism through the music. Interestingly, through the implied irony both the ghost’s and the music’s faith in the nation are clearly questioned (if not completely refuted) by the text.

Yet, even though “The Colored Soldier” attempts to protest Jim Crow and ethnic nationalism in a way that would not distance or shock middle class audiences, the ending of the recitation seems to fizzle into inertia and bitterness. The protagonist recalls that he woke from his slumber, “But broken was the soldier’s dream, too bad to be mended. / And it’s a good thing all the black boys lying dead Over There / Can’t see! And don’t know! And won’t ever care!” (3). His final words are pessimistic and sad: he feels that nothing can be “mended” in America and that the soldiers’ deaths are blessings in disguise. Yet, as Smith and Watson note, memories are collective: “Memory is a means of ‘passing on,’ of sharing a social past that may have been obscured, in order to activate its potential for reshaping a future of and for other subjects” (21). Thus, the sharing of memories, presented as a haunting in Hughes’s dramatic recitation, becomes a way to “activate” America’s betrayal of African Americans in order to “reshape” their future. Even though the protagonist cannot see this potential, “The Colored Soldier” suggests this

possibility and implies hope can come from African American solidarity with unions and other groups dedicated to recuperating rights and increasing economic and social power.

Ultimately, “The Colored Soldier’s” seemingly outdated focus on the Great War had clear ties to the political and social environment in which Hughes was writing. He re-purposes issues, images, and music of World War I to create a subtle condemnation of ethnic nationalism, and his extensive reading tour ensured that the message was heard throughout the United States. And, while he quickly abandoned the genteel form he employs in “The Colored Soldier” for the more explicitly radical agit-prop style of *Scottsboro Limited* (1931), the dramatic recitation served the needs of the early Depression, when fearful audiences were yearning for familiar forms and subject matters. Couched underneath the sentimental familiarity, however, is a radical message that looks ahead to the rising nationalism and fascism of the Second World War that was looming on the horizon.

Chapter Four

A New Form of War: Class Struggle in Conrad Seiler's *Sweet Land* and Abram Hill and John Silvera's *Liberty Deferred*

In 1937, after a period of relative recovery, the United States' economy went into a tailspin. It was known as the "recession of 1937," but Robert McElvaine, historian of the Great Depression, argues that it was really the "new depression" (298). The crisis occurred because it had seemed, early in 1937, that the Depression was over: "Production was [...] above 1929 levels, stock prices and profits were up, and many agreed with South Carolina Senator James Byrnes when he said in May, 'The emergency has passed'" (McElvaine 297). In response, the Roosevelt government cut back on spending and started the Social Security system. The result was catastrophic: "In August 1937 the stock market collapsed again with the Dow Jones average dropping from 190 to 115 over the next two months. Production, sales, and employment also plummeted. By March 1938 the unemployment lists had added 4 million new (and rejoining) members, raising the unemployment level again toward 20 percent" (McElvaine 298). As the nation slipped back into a deep Depression, three men penned plays for the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) that wove African American experiences in World War I into the economic, political, and social questions of the day. They were Conrad Seiler, with his 1937 *Sweet Land*, and Abram Hill and John Silvera, who co-wrote *Liberty Deferred* in 1938. The plays move beyond the genteel drama of the early 1930s and go straight to the heart of the radical political movements going on later in the decade, including the formation of sharecroppers' and tenant farmers' unions in 1934-1935, the increase in industrial labor unions in 1935-1937, and the formation of the National Negro Congress in 1935. In this way, the plays are in tune with their

situations; both advocate a fight in a class struggle that would project into the future, beyond World War I, as new concerns, such as the rumblings of a Second World War, loomed on the horizon.

The creation of *Sweet Land* and *Liberty Deferred* was made possible by the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), a subdivision of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which began on 14 November 1935 to address the situation of thousands of theatre professionals left jobless by the Great Depression.⁹⁴ The intent of the FTP was not only to get people working, but also to create “National, Regional, and American” drama (Craig 3), “a federation of national theatres, each one indigenous to the area and people it served” (Correll 6). To this end, the FTP produced a wide variety of performances, from modern drama to puppet shows and circuses, and it also presented plays in different languages, such as German, Italian, and Yiddish (Craig 3). The project was in operation for four years, from 1935-1939, and during that time

it offered relief to thousands of unemployed theatre workers; introduced hundreds of new plays; mounted 63,729 performances of roughly twelve hundred productions; and brought theatre to audiences estimated at nearly 30,400,000. Furthermore, [...] it presented work in an astonishing range of production modes and styles, kept admission prices low, and demonstrated a willingness to bring theatre to ‘nontraditional’ venues, all of which were instrumental in attracting large numbers of first-time playgoers and lower-middle-class and working-class spectators who had never patronized the commercial theatre. (Frick 228-29)

⁹⁴ For more information on the Federal Writers’ Project, see Jerre Mangione’s *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers’ Project, 1935-1943* (1996), and David A. Taylor’s *Soul of a People: The WPA Writers’ Project Uncovers Depression America* (2009).

Thus, the FTP was not just important for fostering America's theatre professionals; it also helped build the American theatre audience. Yet despite these accomplishments, the FTP was a constant target for accusations of radicalism, such as one radio station's assertion that it was "a veritable hotbed of un-American activity" (qtd. in Brown "Liberty" xx). In this climate, U.S.

Representative Martin Dies' House Un-American Activities Committee investigated the FTP and put it through a "Congressional communist witch-hunt" (Craig 5). On 30 July 1939, amidst these accusations of radicalism and Communist propaganda, the program was closed.⁹⁵ Scores of documents, including scripts, set designs, and audience surveys were "hastily packed up and warehoused in 1939," where they lay, forgotten, until the mid 1970s (Brown "Catalogue" xxiv).

In part because of this inauspicious ending, the legacy of the FTP is much debated.

According to theatre historian John Frick, however, the program made significant contributions to the U.S. theatre industry and the population as a whole: "The Federal Theatre Project serves to this day as the paradigm of an alternative theatre: it was decentralized in an era of centralization, and it was a people's theatre in an era of growing elitism in the commercial sphere" (228-29).

The program had an even more important legacy for African Americans; long denied access to parts in serious drama, access to stages, funding, etc., African American actors, playwrights, and theatre technicians were able to hone their crafts "under expert professional supervision" in the FTP (Adubato 1). Ultimately, more than just providing them jobs, the program gave African Americans the "chance to take [their] rightful place alongside white professionals in the

⁹⁵ Jerre Mangione, writing about the Federal Writers' Project, notes that there were other reasons underlying the programs' closures: "Although the Dies and Woodrum committees hastened the demise of Federal One, they were only partly responsible. For all the disfavor the two committees managed to generate toward the arts projects, their effort became a secondary factor in the changing political atmosphere of 1939 that was to alter the course of the New Deal. The change was largely created by the anxieties (and opportunities) attending the menace of Hitlerism and the imminence of a second world war" (329).

commercial theatre” (Adubato 1-2), and it can be seen as a turning point in the history of African American theatre. Out of this backdrop, Seiler, Hill, and Silvera crafted their plays, creating lasting legacies of their own.

“Dis time we knows what we’sse fightin’ fo’”: Class Struggle in Conrad Seiler’s 1937 *Sweet Land*

On March 25, 1935, as the sun set on the cotton fields surrounding the small town of Marked Tree, Arkansas, a group of forty-some masked men opened fire on the home of C.T. Carpenter, a white attorney for the interracial Southern Tenant Farmer’s Union (STFU). Their actions were a bloody reinforcement of the night raids attacking homes of African American union members. Five days later, armed men overtook a group of African Americans walking home from church; they used pistol butts and flashlights to injure the group. The same night, an African American church was attacked. All of the acts of violence, according to F. Raymond Daniell of the *New York Times*, were in response to the spread of the STFU and were bloody attempts by the “landlords and riding bosses of the big plantations...to stamp out the seeds of unionism sown among their sharecroppers” (18). Their actions did not go unnoticed; the STFU issued a statement that was published in the *New York Times*, and reporters from that same newspaper as well as the *Nation*, *Scribner’s Magazine*, and the *Socialist Call* wrote about the attacks.⁹⁶ Perhaps in an effort to capitalize on the wide-spread attention given to the case, as well

⁹⁶ See STFU’s “Acts of Tyranny and Terror Committed Against Innocent Men, Women, and Children of the Southern Tenant Farmer’s Union in Northeast Arkansas”; “The Cropper Learns His Fate,” *The Nation*, Sept. 18, 1935; “Norman Thomas Attacked in Arkansas,” *Socialist Call*, March 23, 1935; John Herling, “Field Notes from Arkansas,” *Nation*, April 10, 1935; and C. T. Carpenter, “King Cotton’s Slaves: The Fate of the Share-Cropper Becomes a National Issue,” *Scribner’s Magazine*, October, 1935.

as similar stories of violence against other sharecroppers' unions,⁹⁷ Conrad Seiler wrote *Sweet Land* in 1937, a play that uses the Great War as a backdrop for sharecroppers' efforts to unionize and suggests that World War I was capitalist at its core: not a fight for "Democracy," but a war over resources and the maintenance of traditional racial and class hierarchies.

The play opens in 1918 on a U.S. Army transport ship, where African American veterans Chet Jackson, decorated war hero, and Sam Tucker, his best friend, discuss what life will be like after the war. As they sail past the Statue of Liberty, Chet declares that racist practices in the U.S. had to have changed; if they have not, he will lead the fight for equality. Chet's attitude mellows considerably by the time one sees him next, working as a sharecropper in 1937 on the same plot of land his parents have cultivated their whole lives. Every day he wears his war medal atop his tattered clothes. Against the backdrop of his "rickety, dilapidated shack," Chet refuses his wife's and Sam's urgings to support the fledgling interracial Sharecroppers' and Tenant

⁹⁷ It is important to note that Richard Wright, the most well known African American writer of the time, published a short story with remarkable similarities to Seiler's play. Wright's "Bright and Morning Star," published in *New Masses* in 1938, is also set in the rural South, depicts the struggles of an interracial Sharecropper's Union, and focuses on the violence caused by a Sherrif and his men intent on stopping the union, including the murder of an African American organizer and his mother. Black and white solidarity is central to the story, and, like Seiler's play, the story ends with an image of interracial cooperation. The only major aspect of Seiler's play that is missing from Wright's story is a mention of World War I, though Wright does address this topic in his essay "How Bigger Was Born" (1940), when he quotes an ex-soldier saying, "What in hell did I fight in the war for? They segregated me even when I was offering my life for my country" (xiv). Wright's story was even adapted to stage by Ted Ward in 1939 as a one man show at the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, a company founded by Langston Hughes in 1938. Additionally, in 1936 Wright was hired by the Federal Theatre Project to be a literary adviser for its Chicago branch, and later that year transferred to the Federal Writers' Project. He also became the Harlem editor of the Communist newspaper *Daily Worker* in 1937, the year of *Sweet Land's* production. Thus, it seems probable that Wright knew about Seiler's play and that it influenced the creation of his short story. Making this even more remarkable is the fact that Wright's story is widely held as unique because it provides a link between Christianity and Marxism, yet Seiler's play explores this connection as well. Because I learned of this possible connection between Wright and Seiler fairly recently, I have not been able to fully explore the implications of these findings. I plan to do more research and flesh out the connections in the future.

Farmers' Union. Chet, a "good nigger" according to his boss, sees involvement in the union as a sure way to get oneself killed, leaving one's family without support. Because of this stance, Chet's house is chosen as the least suspect location for the first large union meeting. Word of the night meeting leaks, however, and the shack is surrounded by the Ku Klux Klan, with the sheriff, deputies, and the landowners leading the charge. They riddle the shack with bullets and kill two of the sharecroppers. Because he stands up to them, the masked men force Sam out of the house, intent on having a lynching "bee." Chet pleads with them to stop, saying that Sam was his partner in the war. The nightriders respond by punching Chet to the floor. After they leave, Chet removes his war medal and leaves the shack, gun in hand, to rescue his friend. His militancy has come too late; the final scene reveals Sam's dead body hanging from a tree. Chet cuts down his friend, then declares: "Dere's a new war startin', Sam, a might big war, an' we's gonna fight agin...you an' me, Sam, an' all de other poor folks. Dis time we'se a-gonna make dis a sweet lan'—sweet lan'—sweet lan' o' liberty" (7-1). A white fellow traveler enters and Chet shares his change of heart with the other man; he wants to join the union and avenge his friend's death.⁹⁸ The play closes with the two sharecroppers, one African American, one white, staring at the dead body on the ground.

With all of this explicit violence on the stage, including a shootout and a lynch mob, *Sweet Land* seems to revise earlier attempts to dramatize the reality of violence on the home front of America. Instead of audience members *hearing* about a lynching, *Sweet Land* lets them *see* it. Yet this foregrounding of violence is not the only difference between *Sweet Land* and earlier African American World War I plays. *Sweet Land* makes an argument for the need for a

⁹⁸ It is important to note that *Sweet Land*, in contrast to earlier African American World War I drama, presents several white characters in a positive light and as allies to the African American protagonists, in part because of the Marxist approach Seiler was using.

new war on the home front: not one fighting for African Americans’ “Americanness” or citizenship, but a class struggle based on poor white and black workers banding together to fight injustice on all fronts. With this emphasis, the play moves beyond the genteel racial uplift of earlier plays and is explicitly political, taking up the cause of real-life groups like the Southern Tenant Farmer’s Union and calling into question the capitalist foundations of World War I as well as the looming conflict that would become known as World War II.

Analysis of the play is complicated by the fact that Seiler, long considered by scholars an African American playwright, was in fact white. His race was not mentioned in contemporary reviews of the play (possibly an indication of an awareness of his whiteness, as whiteness is typically unmarked in the American idiom), but by 1945 Seiler is listed as “Negro” by Fannin S. Belcher, early chronicler of African American drama (Belcher 289). The classification of Seiler as African American continued into modern scholarship, with Robert Adubato profiling Seiler in his 1978 dissertation, *A History of the WPA’s Negro Theatre Project in NYC, 1935-1939*, and Bernard L. Peterson including Seiler in his 1990 bibliography *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers*. Hatch and Hamalian include Seiler in their anthology of forgotten plays of the Harlem Renaissance, yet they note an absence of biographical information for him (282-83), and Stephens and Perkins list Seiler as an African American man in their appendix of lynching plays (414). Doubt about Seiler’s race was first suggested to me by James Hatch, and I am indebted to his frank and helpful assistance.⁹⁹ Based on Hatch’s comments, I dug deeper into Seiler’s biography and was able to construct a sense of this previously unknown playwright’s life, a life that sheds light on my understanding of *Sweet Land* as a political drama.

⁹⁹ Craig Prentiss, in his article “‘Terrible Laughing God’: Challenging Divine Justice in African American Antilynching Plays, 1916-1945,” also notes that Hatch told him about the discovery that Seiler was white.

Conrad Seiler was born Albert Conrad Seiler on August 3, 1895¹⁰⁰ in Los Angeles to Sigfried and Bertha (Godron) Seiler. Sigfried was a music teacher who immigrated to the United States from Breslow, Germany, in 1880. Bertha was born in Missouri to German parents and bore four children (including Conrad). On all of the extant census records and draft cards, Seiler is listed as white, and his step-grandson, Colin P. Hubbard, confirms this racial classification, adding that Seiler was of Jewish parentage although he did not practice (Hubbard). As the son of German-American parents, Seiler might have been aware of the German theatre émigrés were bringing to America in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, most notably agitation-propaganda. While no records exist to prove Seiler was exposed to this sort of theatre, we know he lived in Los Angeles during the 1920s and 1930s, which was not the hot-bed of political theatre that New York was, but that did have a branch of the New Theatre League, “a combination of leftist theatre groups...[that] combined expressionist techniques with the new agit-prop techniques being used by the labor theatres in Europe” (Murphy 337). *Sweet Land*, with its appeal for class solidarity and the attempt to engage the audience in the class struggle, suggests a familiarity with the specifically German-influenced form of agitation-propaganda.

Seiler’s occupation changed with the years: in the 1917 draft registration and the 1920 U.S. Census he identifies as a self-employed music teacher, but by the 1930 U.S. Census he describes his occupation as a “writer” and his “industry” as a “playwright.” Seiler wrote and published over twenty plays, including two besides *Sweet Land* that focused on African Americans: *Darker Brother* (1938) and *End of the World* (date unknown). He also wrote *Censored* (1938), a play for the Federal Theatre Project that was produced in cities across the

¹⁰⁰ There is some variation on the exact date of Seiler’s birth: above, I quote the date given on his World War I draft registration card. Yet his death record lists his birth as August 4, 1896, and the 1930 U.S. Census lists him as 33, indicating a birth year of 1897.

U.S.¹⁰¹ Seiler's writing was not limited to plays; he also wrote several articles for *The Nation*, a magazine founded by abolitionists in 1865 that describes itself as the "flagship of the Left" but associates with no particular party or movement. One example is his 1930 article "Cantaloupes and Communists," in which he staunchly supports the Agricultural Worker's Industrial League, an interracial farm worker's union that brought together Hispanic, Asian, and white workers in the Imperial Valley of California. He writes of the harassment of the members, including their frequent mass arrest: "A meeting...attended by a few hundred Mexicans and Filipinos, with a scattering of Americanos, was suddenly surrounded and broken up by a mob of deputies...More than one hundred workers were chained together and taken in trucks to the jail." Seiler denounces the official reaction to the union, including the collusion of the owners and law enforcement, and ends his report by stating that the convicted are appealing their cases, "but powerful interests are grimly determined that all shall remain quiet on the labor front in the sovereign State of California" ("Cantaloupes" 244). The reporting that went into the piece suggests that Seiler had firsthand knowledge of interracial farm workers' unions and the violence they faced, experiences that no doubt helped him craft his 1937 *Sweet Land*.

This sort of interest in radical political engagement was also infused into Seiler's daily life. According to Seiler's World War I draft registration card, he refused to serve based on "conscientious objections." Hubbard adds that Seiler did not discuss his experiences as a

¹⁰¹ Other Seiler titles include books of plays *Husband of Xanthuppe: and Other Short Plays* (1929) and *Suicide: and Other One-Act Comedies* (1930). Individually published plays include *Good Night, Caroline* (1928), *Our Girls* (1939), *Bachelor's Wife* (1947), *How to Propose* (1947), *The Clown Who Ran Away* (1948), *The Clown and His Circus* (1953), *Let's Go to the Moon: A Fantasy for Children in 3 Acts* (1955), *The Wonderful Adventures of Don Quixote* (1956), *How to Capture and Keep a Husband* (1959), and *The Wives of Caliph* (date unknown). He published several plays in periodicals such as *One Act Play Magazine and Theatre Review* and *One Act Play Magazine and Radio-Drama Review*, and he also wrote the music for Gwendolyn Logan Seiler's *The Princess and the Swineherd* (1930). In the 1940s, Seiler wrote at least one screenplay, *Redhead* (1941), and commentary for *The Scorched Earth* (1942).

conscientious objector often, but that the few details he did share were stories of mistreatment: “I remember one story—his group [of fellow COs] was assigned to the forestry service fighting forest fires. On one occasion a fuel truck had to drive through a fire area, and Conrad and other men were required to shield the tanker with their bodies” (Hubbard). Seiler was also a Communist sympathizer, and although Hubbard’s mother believed Seiler was a card-carrying member, no records show this affiliation. Hubbard remembers, however, that Seiler was “quite enamored of the Soviet Union,” and that he once “haul[ed] out some Soviet propaganda magazines” for him to read (Hubbard). Seiler’s concern with Communism, unionization, and African Americans in *Sweet Land* mirrors the tone of the Communist Party in the mid-to-late 1930s (as opposed to the Socialist Party or the International Workers of the World (IWW), the other major Marxist groups in America in the first three decades of the twentieth century).

Historian Henry Williams notes that the various Marxist factions had differing approaches to African Americans at different times.¹⁰² The Socialist Party, in its 1920 party platform, declared that “effective federal legislation should be enacted to secure to the Negroes full civil, political, industrial, and educational rights” (Williams 10), but the group did not concern itself with specific issues plaguing African American lives (such as lynching) or the necessity for social equality (Williams 14). The IWW, in contrast, focused on African American workers and spoke to their “economic concerns through direct labor organization.” Williams argues, however, that the IWW ultimately fell into the same trap as did the Socialist Party: it “view[ed] the fulfillment of the black man’s economic needs as the key to his salvation” (13). The Communist Party, which emerged in the United States in 1919, promoted industrial

¹⁰² For a nuanced study of African American literature’s relationship to Communism, see William Maxwell’s *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars*.

unionism as well, but it also “demanded social equality for blacks” (Williams 14). This stance garnered the Party a relatively large (compared to the other branches of Marxism in the U.S.) following in the African American community. William J. Maxwell notes, “An impressive cohort of black intellectuals had thrown their lot in with Bolshevism at the birth of a Harlem New Negro, but Scottsboro made Communism a household word in African American clubs, beauty shops, and churches and added color to the party’s rank and file throughout the United States” (133). The Communist Party’s influence peaked in the middle of the 1930s, so much so that in 1934 the NAACP allowed Herbert Newton, the Harlem Communist Party leader, to address their annual conference. In his address, Newton stated: “Our methods are revolutionary class struggle methods as opposed to class collaboration, reformist, legalistic methods” (qtd. in Hutchinson 121). This statement was rather bold for the context; in the 1930s the NAACP favored all of the methods Newton condemns. Yet his statement is also important for a complete understanding of *Sweet Land* in terms of previous African American World War I drama. *Sweet Land* is pushing for the “revolutionary class struggle” Newton references, rather than the “reformist” messages of prior plays. Seiler’s Communist leanings and conscientious objector status during World War I help explain why he would write *Sweet Land*, a play that shows the fruitlessness of the Great War and the evils of the racist, capitalist society of post-war America.

The production history of *Sweet Land* also highlights these ideas; reviews of the play focus on the class struggle going on in the home front and the move away from genteel dramas to direct political engagement. The play opened on January 19, 1937 at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem by the Negro Youth Theatre, a short-lived subunit of the Federal Theatre Project’s New

York Negro Theatre (Adubato 124).¹⁰³ It had a successful run and closed thirty-five performances later, on February 28, 1937. *Sweet Land* garnered primarily positive reviews in the press, such as the *New Masses*' declaration that "*Sweet Land* is a direct and passionate statement of the oppression of the Negro people in the Deep South...In producing this play, the Youth Unit of the W.P.A. federal Negro theatre has made a genuine contribution to the drama of social struggle" (Taylor 30-31). This carte-blanche praise is perhaps expected from the Communist *New Masses*, but it came from other sources as well. The *Chicago Defender* declared the play a "Big Hit" ("Sweet" 23), and the *Brooklyn Eagle*, although it felt the play lacked sophistication, noted it was "persuasive nevertheless" (quoted in Adubato 129). Douglas Gilbert of the *New York World-Telegram* wrote that *Sweet Land* was "an ambitious production, naïve enough to be sincere...Negroes generally and sociologists familiar with this sordid side of the too solid South will find *Sweet Land* of interest and maybe a stimulant" (24). While Gilbert seems to intend this last statement to be a recommendation of the play, his emphasis on African Americans or sociologists being the only audience who would enjoy it seems to miss the message of interracial cooperation with which *Sweet Land* ends. The most mixed review came from Richard Lockridge of *The Sun*. He saw "the virtues of sincerity and honest feeling" in the play, calling it "one of pressing importance, and rich in the elements of drama." Yet he also felt the production was done "crudely in broad, flat swashes of melodrama" and that the characters were stereotypes out of the "Tom show": "it is all obvious, too easy and flat in both method and content" (qtd. in Adubato 128-129).

¹⁰³ Adubato notes that the Negro Youth Theatre's purpose was to provide work and experience for young artists (124). *Sweet Land*, however, was the group's only production; it dissolved soon after because of personal conflicts among the three directors (Adubato 130).

Audience surveys of *Sweet Land* also give slightly mixed reviews. The surveys (a wonderful resource for current researchers) are part of the FTP National Play Bureau's effort between fall 1936 and spring 1937 to "provide feedback for Federal Theatre producers and directors on certain questions vital to their operations: type of audience; reactions to the play; audience reaction to the idea of a permanent Federal Theatre; and general suggestions from the audience on all aspects of the productions" (Adubato 263). The survey of *Sweet Land* audiences took place between February 4 and February 28, 1937, and included 756 responses. Overall, the reactions were positive; "478 said they liked the play, 19 did not, 8 thought it fair, and 54 did not respond" (Adubato 275). Even though these survey results indicate an excellent showing, both Adubato and Rena Fraden note that the negative comments included on the surveys are perhaps the keys to understanding the African American audience's reaction, an audience that was primarily upwardly mobile and middle class. Fraden states that "white respondents were almost unanimous in their enjoyment of the play" but that it "played to disappointingly small black audiences" who were "divided but also quite articulate about their objections" (151). The complaints circle around three main issues: "The first group wanted plays that spoke directly to it about northern life...A second group found all problem plays boring, too 'preachy social'...And a third group was embarrassed by the 'low-brow' subject matter" (Fraden 151). This last group left comments such as "Please do not bring any more of these degrading plays. Show those that uplift the race. Uncle Tom is dead; let's forget him," and "We need something more enlightening for our children. Very degrading to our race" (quoted in Adubato 275). Because the African American audience was comprised of people who were middle class who valued "genteel," "hi-brow" entertainment, their reactions to the play indicate a fairly predictable desire for the drama of racial uplift from earlier years (Cotter's *On the Fields of France*, or Hughes's "The Colored

Soldier,” for example) instead of the direct political appeals of *Sweet Land*. The reactions also indicate the audiences’ awareness of unrefined stereotypes in the play; *Sweet Land* was not “double voiced,” to use Henry Louis Gates’ notion of a “word or utterance...decolonized for the black’s purpose” (50).¹⁰⁴ In contrast to the “signifyin(g)” nature of African American literature and performance (Butterbeans and Susie minstrel shows, for example, with their multiple layers and subtexts), Seiler’s one-dimensional stereotypes perhaps belie a German American writer who was not familiar with or skilled in the process of “double voicing.”

Ironically, the play begins with a throwback to earlier, more genteel African American World War I plays (such as *On the Fields of France*) with the characters’ optimistic insistence that the war—in Europe and at home—has been won. As they sail back to American shores, Chet and Sam discuss their experiences in the Great War and how their service will change their situation in the U.S. Sam murmurs, “So de big noise is all ovah. No mo’ war...I’m mighty glad, I sho’am. I was plumb tuckered out wide dem ‘boom, booms,’ all day long, an’ so damn loud dey split yo’ ears open; an dat shrapnel a-whistlin’ by, an’ de stinkin’ muc—Jesus Christ! Member dat time, near de Argonne, when we was sent wid dat detail to bury dem white fellers?” (3). Sam’s statement outlines general realities of trench warfare: the deafening sound of guns and bombs, shrapnel, and thick mud. Yet he speaks to a specifically African American soldier’s experience when he remembers the assignment of burying white bodies, as African American labor troops were typically given this onerous job (Barbeau and Henri 104). His lines also indicate a belief that the war is *over*, a sentiment echoed by Chet who replies, “yeah—no mo’ war” (3). This refrain, “no mo’ war,” takes on double significance as the men transition from speaking about the war in Europe to the racial war in the U.S. Sam, describing how Chet won

¹⁰⁴ One notable use of Gates’ theory as it applies to African American drama is Harry Elam Jr.’s 1992 “Signifyin(g) on African American Theatre: ‘The Colored Museum’ by George Wolfe.”

his war medal, remembers: “An’ de trench blow up, an’ you grab dose white fellers an’ save deir lives? Dat’s what made you a real hero, Chet. An’ dat’s why you wearin’ dat medal on yo’ chest. Dere won’t be no stopping Chet Jackson f’om now on. Maybe you’ll be president, or somethin’ some day” (3). While Sam might be joking a little when he suggests Chet might one day be President, his recitation of Chet’s heroic act is saturated with optimism for the future. He believes post-war America will be different for African Americans, so different that an African American man might some day be President. The optimism of this statement, as well as the image of an African American soldier saving white ones, links Sam and Chet to earlier African American World War I plays, such as *On the Fields of France* and *Stragglers in the Dust*, which also feature a heroic black soldier saving a white life. This depiction of the demobilization of two African American veterans, written in 1937, reflects back on the period right after the war, when hope was still alive that African American service (and heroism) was enough to prove their worth as citizens deserving equal treatment in the nation.

Yet, perhaps because of the difficulty of writing a purely optimistic account of African American service from the depths of the Depression, Chet and Sam’s early conversation also touches on a militant resolve to change injustice in the U.S. Sam asks, “You reckon dere’s gonna be a kinda change fo’ us back home?...Fo’ de black folks—you know, lil easier!” Chet exclaims, “Damn right, it’s gonna be easier!” Sam continues, “Suttinly oughta. We done fought fo’ our country. We left our blood an’ guts ovah dere, a-minglin’ wid de white boys. An’ our dead ones is a-layin’ near dem, side by side, together.” Sam’s statement becomes a catalogue of the sacrifices African Americans made for the war effort, an argument for why they deserve change on the home front. Chet’s response goes further, indicating an optimism grounded in militancy: “Why you talk like dat, Sam. Sho’ it’s gonna be diff’re’n’, ‘cause we ain’t gonna let it

be nothin' else" (4). In one way, this exchange emphasizes the optimism during the period right after the war and the renewed militancy of returning soldiers, such as in *Aftermath* when John strides out the door to confront his father's murderers. But in another way the lines foreshadow Chet's ultimate response to the violence in his community; he is resolved to fight for a different society. Chet's final statement is explicitly militant and political, the first indication that this play is no longer fitting into the genteel model of African American World War I plays.

Yet when the curtain opens onto Chet's sharecropper cabin nearly twenty years later, one sees all too clearly that Chet and Sam's optimism was premature; the play's presentation of sharecropping shows that the racial and economic war on the home front is still raging. The cabin is a "rickety, dilapidated shack, indistinguishable from the home of any other sharecropper, white or black. The cabin is unpainted; urgent repairs have been made with stray bits of odds and ends...The window is boarded up where the pane is broken...Beyond is an arid field of weeds and stubble, and the river" (1-1). The run down shack has potent symbolism; with the broken and boarded up windows, the setting indicates that the occupants can't see any other future: there is no way out. Chet's home also references the stark realities of sharecropping in the latter years of the Depression. The "field of weeds and stubble" possibly refers to the natural disasters that ripped through the country during the Depression: "drought, dust storms, and poor soil conservation practices led to substantial loss of farmable land in the Dust Bowl. The continued spread of the cotton-destroying boll weevil and flooding in the Mississippi Delta, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Texas left thousands more without land to till" (Greenberg 24). Yet, more in keeping with the play's emphasis on America being the site of a racial and class war, the set could also reference the "unproductive and irrational" sharecropping system: "Landowners did not allow their tenants or sharecroppers to plant for self-sufficiency or to improve the soil

because these would have enabled their farm hands to escape debt” (Greenberg 127). Thus, to keep race and class oppression constant, landowners preferred to keep their fields undernourished and overworked. The “stubble” in the fields could also be a reference to cotton fields that had been plowed under for New Deal programs: “In the South, the landowners received payments for reducing cotton production but were supposed to give part of the money to their tenants and sharecroppers. Many landlords did not do so, however, especially with blacks” (Levine 155). In this way, the set emphasizes the unequal conditions sharecropping created and perpetuated for African Americans.

The play also emphasizes a racial and class struggle through its focus on the toll sharecropping has taken on Chet’s family. Chet and his wife Becky are “very poorly dressed,” yet Chet still wears his war medal (1-4). The medal seems to be a symbol of Chet’s continued belief in the American capitalist system; he seems unwilling to believe his sacrifices in the war were for nothing. For example, when Becky complains about the constant work and nonexistent gains of sharecropping, Chet responds: “What’s de matter wid dat? Dere’s heaps o’ folks ain’t got nothin’ to do. We always keeps on a-working” (1-6). His response emphasizes the Depression raging in 1937, when 31.5% of African Americans were unemployed (Boyd 648).¹⁰⁵ Yet it also highlights his belief in the capitalist system, that a worker should be thankful for employment, no matter how menial or horrible, because only hard work makes advancement possible. Yet the family history we learn about Chet makes one question his faith in this system. Sharecropping has cost Chet his first wife, Hattie, whom he loved dearly (1-5). More recently, it has also cost him his children. Becky exclaims, “Jes’ think o’ poor Flo’ene an’ Charles—our chillun—dead an gone fo’ dey has a chance” (1-6). The lifestyle of sharecropping, with its hard

¹⁰⁵ Compared to 20.9% of white Americans (Boyd 648).

labor, lack of adequate medical care, and lack of proper nutrition killed these family members. These “casualties” of the war on the home front suggest that Chet’s faith in the American capitalist system is perhaps perpetuating the carnage.

The play’s presentation of sharecropping equating to neo-slavery also casts the United States as a zone of unending economic war. Becky, in her pleas with Chet to leave the land and begin a new life somewhere else, highlights these economic realities:

You give Mistah Neil half o’ yo’ crop. Den he look in his ‘count book, an’ what he say? He say you’se in debt to him fo’ de food you buy in his store, fo’ mule feed, fo’ fert’lizer, fo’ all de furnish he give you, fo’ int’rest, an fo’ de Lawd knows what else. We cain’t nevah git ‘way f’om heah. We been owin’ somethin’ to Mistah Neil since we was married. Las’ year, fifty dollars, year ‘fo’ la’s, fo’ty-six dollars; dis year, mo’ still. Ev’ey bit o’ dat cotton patch we planted, an’ chopped an picked—it was all owed ‘fo’ it was growed. An’ ev’ey year we gits les an’ less. We ain’t got no clothes, nothi’ decen’ to eat, an’ de house it’s all comin’ to pieces. (1-7)

Becky’s statement details the economic hole the couple is in; by working harder, they actually dig themselves deeper into debt. She also draws a parallel to slavery in her statement, “we cain’t never git ‘way f’om heah.” They are trapped on their plot by the economic policies of sharecropping, forced to live with substandard clothes, shelter, and food. In these ways, sharecroppers’ lives “differed little from those of their parents and grandparents who endured slavery and the pre-Civil War plantation system” (Hurt 1). Becky’s pronouncement mirrors the matter-of-fact description that the landowner, Mr. Neil, gives to another white man when asked how long Chet has been his employee: “Years. His father was one of my father’s niggers. Chet

left us for awhile during the War, but he came back” (1-10). Neil’s statement seems to be an echo of previous plantation owners who passed slaves down through the generations as property. Neil’s brand of neo-slavery was not uncommon. According to a 1938 Women’s Bureau pamphlet that surveyed African American workers in various regions and fields, “tenancy in the Old South is the successor to the slave system. Both institutions were, in different ways, devices for holding on the land, on a subsistence basis, sufficient labor to meet the maximum seasonal requirements of agriculture” (qt. in Greenberg 138). The most explicit link between sharecropping and slavery, however, comes when Sam explains, “I travel all over de south. Wherevah I go, I fin’ de same—like in de’ slav’ry days. ‘Cept dere’s white slaves too now” (6-3). Sam’s lines plainly argue that sharecropping is neo-slavery, but he moves beyond the issue of slavery only referring to African Americans. Instead, his statement that the only difference is that “dere’s white slaves too now,” moves the play’s consideration of sharecropping into an interracial class issue. Thus, through the play’s presentation of sharecropping as a form of neo-slavery, it highlights the inequalities in the current system and sets up its argument for black and white cooperation in sharecroppers’ unions.

The most striking example of Depression-era America as a zone of racial and class conflict, however, comes from *Sweet Land’s* presentation of lynching. Throughout the play, white landowners and law enforcement officers threaten to organize a lynch mob, and audience members actually see the result by the end of the play. Lynching was a major issue in the third decade of the twentieth century. In 1930 there was a surge in the number of lynchings in the U.S.,¹⁰⁶ and the upswing in violence spurred an “intensification of the campaign for a federal

¹⁰⁶ Greenberg notes that “lynchings, which had declined slightly in the late 1920s, surged again with economic hardship...one source estimated twenty-one lynchings of black people in 1930,

antilynching law” (Trotter 174). In fact, Walter White, the NAACP’s executive secretary starting in 1931, “devoted more of the organization’s time to working for federal antilynching legislation than to anything else during the 1930s” (Levine 162).¹⁰⁷ Activists calling for legislation believed that, as long as all states would not prosecute mob violence against African Americans, federal legislation was the only answer. For example, the National Youth Administration’s Division of Negro Affairs, a WPA organization created in 1936, stated in a 1937 report: “We therefore strongly urge the passage by the first session of the 75th Congress without delay of a strong federal anti-lynching law...No American dare deny that there are certain states which either cannot or will not prevent lynchings or punish lynchers, and that it is therefore obligatory upon the national Congress to enact legislation to this end” (qtd. in Trotter 186). In 1935 and 1937, antilynching legislation did pass the House, but, “as it had in 1922 and would again in 1940, [it] failed each time to pass the Senate, with its large number of white-supremacist southern members. Nor did the bill ever receive Roosevelt’s open endorsement” (Greenberg 79). With this backdrop, *Sweet Land* adds its specifically Marxist voice to the multitude of others protesting the inhumanity of lynching, including a long list of playwrights. Judith Stephens and Kathy Perkins have identified a genre of plays called lynching dramas, plays where a lynching “has a major impact on the dramatic action” (3). In her 1999 “Racial Violence and Representation: Performance Strategies in Lynching Dramas of the 1920s,” Stephens notes that “Despite plays such as Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* (1905), a white supremacist defense of lynching, most lynching dramas are written in the anti-lynching tradition and reflect a tradition of black and white Americans working together against racial injustice” (657). *Sweet*

up from seven the year previous. In 1933 that figure rose to twenty-eight, with fifteen in 1934 and twenty in 1935. Many more went unreported” (78).

¹⁰⁷ White is also notable for having written the book *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* in 1929.

Land exemplifies this tradition, with its mix of black and white characters working together to end race and class oppression, but it does so with a particularly Marxist spin.

Thus, the play's depiction of lynching connects not just to the anti-lynching campaigns of the NAACP and the genre of lynching plays, but also to a Marxist understanding of the economic underpinnings of the act. C.L.R. James, historian and Socialist theorist born in Trinidad and Tobago, wrote in his 1940 essay "The Economics of Lynching," that "Marxists have always insisted that lynching had nothing to do with the protection of 'the purity of womanhood'" (34). Instead, they argue that "lynching is rooted in the economic system and even the very forms it takes are conditioned by the specific class relations of the two races" (James 35). To illustrate his case, James points to Arthur F. Raper's 1933 sociological study, *The Tragedy of Lynching*. Through analysis of more than twenty lynchings in 1930, Raper noted patterns in mob formation and police behavior depending on geographic region. In what he calls the Black Belt, the area where Seiler's play takes place, Raper noted a distinct form of lynching:

The Black Belt lynching is something of a business transaction... The whites there, chiefly of the planter class and consciously dependent upon the Negro for labor, lynch him to conserve traditional landlord-tenant relations rather than to wreak vengeance upon his race. Black Belt white men demand that the Negroes stay out of their politics and dining room, the better to keep them in their fields and kitchens" (57-58).

Sweet Land highlights this notion of the white landed class using lynching as a "business transaction" to keep neo-slavery conditions in place for the black working class. The play also underscores the ideological relations between the bourgeoisie and the working class; it shows

how Southern landowners romanticize the feudal system of American slavery and use lynching as a reaction to the disruption of that relationship.

The first instance in the play where lynching is shown as the weapon of the white bourgeoisie comes when Rogers, a local sheriff's deputy, is trying to root out union activity in the county by questioning African American men. After the men have left, Rogers exclaims, "Stinkin' niggers! You hear the way that dirty bastard spoke up just now? I'll kill him some day, an' he won't be the first one neither. You know what's the matter round here, Blaine? I'll tell you what's the matter. There ain't been a decent lynchin' bee for a mighty long time" (2-3). Rogers's comments indicate that lynching is not unusual in the (unnamed) southern county in which Chet and Becky live; Rogers has killed African Americans before. His lines also show that he views lynching as a *social* activity: a "bee" where one gathers with ones' neighbors to accomplish a task.¹⁰⁸ Yet, it is important to note that the neighbors Rogers evokes are specifically white and middle class, and that the task he speaks of uses the psychology of lynching to control the black working class in order to "conserve traditional landlord-tenant

¹⁰⁸ The social nature of lynchings in the U.S. is a widely documented phenomenon (see, for example, Walter White's *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch*, 1929, Trudier Harris's *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*, 1984; Sandra Gunning's *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912*, 1996; Kirk W. Fuoss's "Lynching Performances, Theatres of Violence" 1999; Judith L. Stephens's "Racial Violence and Representation: Performance Strategies in Lynching Dramas of the 1920s," 1999; and David A. Davis's "Not Only War is Hell: World War I and African American Lynching Narratives," 2008). One well-publicized example also shows American lynchings as a social phenomena. Claude Neal was arrested on October 19, 1934 in Florida for murder. That night, a mob captured him and lynched him in front of more than 4,000 people, "alerted to the spectacle by announcements in fifteen newspapers" (Greenberg 78) and through the radio. Walter White, in a report covering the lynching, wrote that "the word was passed all over north-eastern Florida and southeastern Alabama that there was to be a 'lynching party to which all white people are invited,'" and that the spectators took souvenirs from Neal's tortured dead body (quoted in Trotter 211). Neal's murder was used to illustrate the need for the 1935 antilynching bill, with groups as disparate as the NAACP and the Communist Party using the lynching as a rallying cry for legislative action (Greenberg 79).

relations” (Raper 57). The fact that Rogers is not one of the landlords, but rather just a sheriff’s deputy, also connects to a Marxist understanding of lynching. James writes that in the Black Belt, “the county officials are direct agents of the plantation owners and are well paid. The Sheriff in Bolivar county [Mississippi], for instance, received in 1931 \$40,000 a year, ten times the salary of the governor of Mississippi” (35). Thus, it makes sense that Rogers would be so virulently opposed to African American union building and sees lynching as an appropriate response; he has a vested economic interest in maintaining the (white) landlord and (black) tenant system.

Rogers is not the only character to think of lynching in this way; the landlords also consider lynching a tool to safeguard their economic power against the threat of union activity. After Mr. Neal (the landowner) and the sheriff have learned of the Sharecroppers’ Union meeting at Chet’s house, Mr. Neal instructs his hired man: “Ride over to Greensboro right away. Round up the boys. You’ll have plenty of time. Tell them to meet us at the crossroads near the river at seven-thirty. They must avoid Nigger Row—take the other road... Tell them to bring their outfits and plenty of ammunition. We’re going to have a little shooting party to-night” (5-7). Neal’s instructions to “avoid Nigger Row,” or the African American side of town, is so that no one will warn the meeting’s attendees that a suspicious group of men is heading toward them. Even more importantly, the “outfits” he mentions belong to the Ku Klux Klan; he plans to start a “party” with his white-robed compatriots, a group which includes all of the law enforcement officers.¹⁰⁹ Neal’s comments mirror Raper’s depiction of 1930s lynchings in the Black Belt,

¹⁰⁹ According to Michael Lewis and Jacqueline Serbu, Ku Klux Klan membership actually declined during the 1930s. In fact, membership had “deteriorated rapidly after 1925” because of sex and embezzlement scandals and the passage of stricter immigration laws (145). Yet, support for the Klan was still evident in 1937 when Hugo Black (a formerly active KKK member) was nominated for U.S. Supreme Court Justice. An opinion poll from the time shows 43% of

where he notes that typically there was not the usual “widespread hysteria,” but a small mob convened by the landowners that moved with “almost clock-like precision” (57). This description fits *Sweet Land* perfectly, even down to Neal’s precise timing. Through this specific portrayal of lynching, *Sweet Land* shows that the violence is more than simple mob fervor or racial antagonism; Mr. Neal uses lynching in an attempt to control his African American workers and keep them from impeding his profits with their union.

This insistence on using lynching as a tool of economic repression has deadly consequences. After attacking Chet’s shack, riddling it with bullets and killing two people (one shot at point-blank range), the “party” of landowners and law enforcement officers takes Sam into the woods and lynches him. Chet finds his friend dangling from a tree: “Over one limb is a hempen rope, and hanging from the rope is the body of Sam Tucker. His hands are tied behind his back; his feet are tied together. His face is streaked with blood. Most of his clothing has been ripped from him. The body is still swinging slightly” (7-1). This depiction of Sam’s body after the lynching connects to Trudier Harris’s assertion in *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* that at its core, lynching is about performing white supremacy:

Lynching and burning rituals reflect a belief, on the part of whites, in their racial superiority...To violate the inviolable, as any Black would who touched a white

Americans supporting a Klan member’s nomination (145). To add more depth to this discussion of the KKK, it is helpful to think of Klan history in three periods. The first major period was from 1865-1871, the second period was from 1915-the mid 1920s, and the third period began with the Civil Rights movement and still exists today (142). It is interesting to note that World War I influenced the 1915 reorganization of the Klan; the organization was reformed in part because of the particular social tensions in the U.S. caused by war, including a surge in European immigrants and the waves of Southern African Americans moving North in the Great Migration. In response, the Klan of the period from 1915 to the mid 1920s focused on “immigration restriction [and] promotion of white Protestant Americanism” (Lewis and Serbu 142).

woman or became mayor of a town, is taboo. It upsets the white worldview or conception of the universe. Therefore, in order to exorcise the evil and restore the topsy-turvy world to its rightful position, the violator must be symbolically punished...Symbolic punishment becomes communal because the entire society has been threatened; thus the entire society must act to put down the violator of the taboo. (11-12)

Sam's body, hanging from the tree, has been "communal[ly]" punished by the white men "threatened" by his commitment to unionization. But it is important to note that Sam did not "touch a white woman" or "become mayor of a town." Instead, *Sweet Land* shows that the continuation of white supremacy is contingent not just on punishing violators of *racial* taboos, but *class* taboos as well. As an advocate of black and white working class solidarity, Sam was a double threat, and his body has been left hanging from a tree by his lynchers as a warning to others thinking about violating the same taboos. Kirk W. Fuoss, in his 1999 "Lynching Performances, Theatres of Violence," explains such warnings: "the sites chosen for many lynchings suggest that even when the executions were private affairs, those responsible for these murders nevertheless often intended that their handiwork be witnessed. Why else would lynchers leave their victims dangling from sites such as water towers, bridges, train trestles, balconies of courthouses, and trees along major highways or railroads?" (24). By showing Sam's body hanging from such a tree, *Sweet Land* seems to attempt to subvert such spectacles; rather than use Sam's lynched body as a warning against others violating racial or class taboos, *Sweet Land* uses the lynched body as a symbol to rally around and incite race and class consciousness.

Yet the sight of Sam's lynched body, still swinging from its torture, is highly irregular in lynching dramas; Perkins and Stephens, in their introduction to *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching*

by *American Women*, note that in most lynching plays, “the lynching incident is described, most commonly by a woman, to other characters, and this verbal re-creation or telling of events plays a prominent role in the drama” (9). The fact that Seiler chose to create such a spectacle, rather than just have a character tell of the lynching scene, suggests that Seiler wanted to expose audience members to the horrific “realness” of lynching. Yet, such a move primarily seems to focus on a white audience for whom lynching might have been far-removed from their experience. The impact of such a spectacle on African American audience members, however, many of whom might have experienced racist violence or had the aftermath of lynching touch them personally, must be questioned.¹¹⁰ It seems that Seiler, by forcing his mixed New York Federal Theatre audience to confront the lynched body,¹¹¹ wanted to create an American No-Man’s Land strewn with corpses to shock audience members into recognizing that America was a deadly war zone for African Americans. Yet despite this seeming concern with African American issues, this violent scene really only plays to white reaction and sympathy (perhaps another example of the lack of “double voicing” in the play).¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Robert Zangrando writes that *all* African Americans of the time were intimately familiar with lynching: “Every black person knew of family members, friends, acquaintances, and friends of friends who had felt the terror of summary justice” (18). Similarly, Ann Field Alexander, speaking of the late 19th century, writes that “lynchings occurred so frequently in the South that nearly every African-American must have witnessed a lynching or known someone who had” (199).

¹¹¹ While census records indicate that Seiler lived in Los Angeles during the production of *Sweet Land*, it is unknown whether or how often he travelled to New York or if he was involved in staging the play. Because of the subject matter he chose to write about, however, one can presume that he imagined both an African American and white audience for the play.

¹¹² In this way, Seiler seems to have fallen into the same trap that Richard Wright recognized in his early writing. Speaking about the reviews for his book of short stories, *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), Wright stated: “I realized that I had made an awfully naïve mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about” (“How Bigger” xxvii).

In the face of such overpowering violence and economic subjugation, *Sweet Land* puts forth a simple answer to the pressing problems facing American workers: interracial collectivization through unions. By proposing this as a solution, the play is in tune with its historical moment. During the 1930s, several unions fought to change economic and racial injustices for both white and black farm workers.¹¹³ In addition to the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union discussed above, a group that has particular relevance to *Sweet Land* is the Sharecroppers' Union, a Communist-run group that numbered 5,500 in 1933 and that supported cotton pickers' strikes until it folded in 1939. Greenberg notes its activity in the years leading up to Seiler's writing *Sweet Land*:

A 1935 strike by cotton choppers in Alabama brought higher wages in a few counties, but led to arrests and severe beatings by both law enforcement officers and vigilante groups elsewhere in the state, where the strikes collapsed. A picker's strike later that year resulted in brutal violence, including the beating of dozens of men and women not involved in the union and the killing of at least six. (39-40)

While there is no proof that Seiler was aware of the 1935 Sharecroppers' Union strike, his reporting on similar issues in his home state of California, his general interest in Communism,

¹¹³ It should be noted, however, that interracial unionization was not without its tensions. William J. Maxwell, for instance, writing about the 1919 race riots of the Red Summer, notes: "The culpability of white unionists in triggering the riots was more difficult to judge than in the East St. Louis explosion of 1917, just days before which the city's Central Trade and Labor Union officially declared that 'drastic action must be taken...to get rid of a certain portion of [black migrants].' Yet it was hard to avoid the post-riot message that white factory workers, jealous of the price of labor and ushered into segregated locals by the American Federation of Labor, did not welcome the entrance of blacks into the northern proletariat that both wartime industrial expansion and *The Crusader* [a small African American Communist journal] had urged" (35). Similarly, African American membership in most craft unions was barred until 1935, and large scale interracial industrial organization did not happen until the late 1930s (Greenberg 33-34).

and the noticeable similarities between the Alabama strike and the plot of the play indicate a strong likelihood that Seiler was familiar with this union and its activities.

Sweet Land certainly advocates for the interracial solidarity that the real-life Sharecropper's Union promoted. For example, the play introduces white characters as friends, or "fellow travelers," of the African American characters. Tom, a white sharecropper who attends the meeting at Chet's house, explains the war he feels has permeated both African American and white homes: "Ain't we both cheated by the same bosses? Ain't all our women gittin' old before their time—white and colored together? What the hell! We always gonna fight each other for the sake of them bastards that own us, instead of fightin' them?" (3-15). Tom introduces a new concept of the war on the home front: a war between *classes* rather than *races*. He questions the logic of poor sharecroppers fighting each other rather than confronting the men who "own" them, white and black alike. The notion of waging a class-based war is also encouraged by Jake, an African American neighbor of Chet's. He asks, "What's de diff'rence 'tween white cropper an' colored? He's white trash, an' we'se black, he's tar heel, an' we'se niggers, he's a dirt eater, and hill-billy, and we'se jes plain bastards. Dey ain't no diff'rence, 'cept de color" (6-2). By creating a catalogue of slurs heaped on the two groups of sharecroppers, Jake emphasizes *class* solidarity rather than racial alliances.

It is just this solidarity that threatens the white landowners. At first, they find it laughable; Rogers, the sheriff's deputy, says "Whites and niggers? Don't make me laugh!" (2-5). He seems to find the idea of interracial cooperation unbelievable, and brushes off the idea. As news of the union spreads, however, the white bourgeoisie grow deadly serious. Neil, reading a letter from a landowner in a neighboring county, says that they've already evicted numerous sharecroppers suspected to be working with the union. He reads, "We can't let this thing grow,

there is no telling where it would end. The Sheriff of our county is conducting a thorough investigation of his own. If the law don't prove effective, you know we got other means" (2-8). The letter has fear coursing just below its surface; its statement "we can't let this thing grow" indicates the power the landowners realize the sharecroppers would have if their union is successful. It also emphasizes the threat of lynching, the "other means" by which they can control their workers. Mr. Neal, while more eloquent, promotes the same ideas. He tells his fellow landowners and law enforcement agents:

I needn't tell you what unions have done for the North, and for those places down South where they've gained a foothold. They've wrecked industry; they've created strife and constant friction between employer and employee, between tenant and landowner...It's up to all of us to keep to the old traditions of the South, those fine traditions of peace and contentment, from which we all benefit.
(2-9)

While Neal's statement is more eloquent than the neighbor's thinly-veiled threat of lynching, it still holds the same underlying fear and threat of violence. When he mentions the "old traditions of the South," he is including the racial and economic stigmatization of large groups of people so his race and class can have "peace and contentment." The "fine traditions" he speaks of include lynching, a practice that clearly only "benefit[s]" his group. Both Neal's and the neighbor's responses to union growth indicate fear that their way of life is being threatened; they are terrified that their racial and economic dominance might possibly be in danger.

Sweet Land shows, however, that the white landowners cannot stop the union movement; the union is likened to a new religion, one that is converting members rapidly and changes those members' beliefs forever. When he's trying to convince others to join the union, Jake, Chet's

African American neighbor, says, “we all git together wid de other poor croppers--like one big congregation—why, hell, man, dere’s nothin’ we *cain’t* do!” (3-11). While the ploy of couching union concerns within a Christian framework does not fit a traditional Marxist viewpoint, in one sense, Jake simply is using a metaphor that his audience, church-going sharecroppers, will relate to. But the repetition of this metaphor in the play indicates a replacement of Christianity with the union, a new sort of religion that can bring *earthly* (rather than heavenly) rewards for its followers. For example, Jake states, “b’lieve me, dis heah cropper’s union is mighty fine thing fo’ us. Jes’ like a new r’ligion.” Becky responds, “we sho’ needs a new one roun’ heah” (3-13). Jake also replaces religious verses from a song Mammy, Chet’s mother, sings at the opening of a scene with verses about the union (4-4).¹¹⁴

Chet, however, remains unmoved and unconverted, an Uncle Tom figure until the end of the play. When talking about the union with Sam, he says, “Whites an’ blacks together--? You crazy, man—plumb crazy! Tain’t nevah been done befo’.” Sam replies, “It has been done befo’, Chet. What about dat War? Didn’t we all fight together?” Chet answers, “Yeah, but not all in de same companies, I may look like a fool nigger, but I ain’t dat foolish” (3-12). Even when faced with interracial cooperation during the Great War (and seeing as though he won his war medal for rescuing white soldiers), Chet refuses to believe sharecroppers could agitate together to gain any rights. In fact, throughout the play Chet expresses his opinion that unionization will lead to more harm than good. After Becky complains about the hardships of sharecropping, Chet answers, “I know Becky, I know all ‘bout dat. But ‘taint no good complainin.” Becky responds, “An’ you call yo’self a man! Chet Jackson, I hate to tell you what I calls you! You say you fight in dat War f’ justice an’ libe’ty. Yeah, an’ you nevah fight since! You go roun’ bein’ proud an’

¹¹⁴ In *Sweet Land*, as in the Mam Sue character in *Aftermath*, Mammy represents Christianity as a worn-out ideology.

cocky, a-wearin' dat ole medal..." Chet interrupts: "Wait a minute now! You kin say what you like 'bout me, but you gotta leave dis heah medal alone, see?... What you want me to do—put mah head in de noose? Dat gonna make things better fo' us? Is it? Nigger cain't complain too much, you know dat, Becky. Gotta take things as dey come" (1-7). In one way, Chet's defense of his non-union stance is rational; he has a practical knowledge of the consequences of standing up to those in power (death by lynching, or the "noose"). Yet here, as in other places in the play, Chet is figured as an Uncle Tom, a yes-man who grins and bows to the whites in power.¹¹⁵ The figure of Uncle Tom was a controversial one when Seiler wrote this play:

It was in the Depression decade that black people began to speak disparagingly rather than admiringly of Uncle Tom, the hero of Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous nineteenth-century novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Formerly viewed as a symbol of Christian piety and humility, whose suffering ignited such sympathy from northern whites as to imbue the Civil War with its moral force, Tom now seemed to the newly politicized and activist black community like a spineless lapdog.

(Greenberg 154)

¹¹⁵ Chet was also repeatedly called an Uncle Tom in reviews of the production: for example, the *Chicago Defender* describes *Sweet Land* as "a gripping drama depicting the struggle between Negro sharecroppers and white farm owners for economic and social justice. In it we watch the evolution of Chet Jackson from a bowing, shaking Uncle Tom type to a militant leader of his people" ("Sweet" 23). Similarly, Gilbert in the *New York World-Telegram* states, "I have no doubt the grievances shown are real and justify the belligerency of Mr. Seiler's play. A striking part of his woeful message is the present difficulty in organizing what his more truculent brother calls the 'Uncle Tom' or 'yes, sir,' Negro, which is stressed in Chet's early characterization" (24).

World War I had a hand in creating the “newly politicized” African American community, and post-Great War African American literature often shows this anti-Uncle Tom stance.¹¹⁶ Chet’s presentation in the play fully embodies this “spineless lapdog” characterization, as he’s constantly called a “good nigger” by Mr. Neal (2-14), and he repeatedly makes statements such as “When you don’t like somethin’ you jes gotta swallow it, dat’s all” (3-2). This last statement is in direct opposition to his 1918 declaration that “we ain’t gonna let it [America] be nothin’ else” than a Sweet Land of Liberty (4). It seems that twenty years of hard manual labor has dulled Chet’s revolutionary beliefs. He no longer believes that the war on the home front is worth fighting.

When his best friend is lynched, however, Chet becomes a convert to the new religion of the Sharecroppers’ Union. As the Klan leaves his house, Sam in tow, Chet rises and removes his war medal. He says, “Becky, I been wearin’ dis medal fo’ long, long time. It’s for bein’ a good soldier. I got no use fo’ it no mo’. Heah—you kin’ have it. Take it ovah to Memphis some time. Maybe you can hook it fo’ a dollar” (6-10). Chet feels his medal, as a symbol of his belief in the American capitalist system, is worthless, fit only for the pawnshop. He is done being a “good soldier” and instead picks up his gun to rescue his friend; he has become a soldier in the class conflict that capitalism has created. This new characterization is illuminated when Chet comes upon Sam’s body. He says:

Dey reckon dey killed you. But dey cain’t kill you, Sam, none of you, cause you’s a-livin’ in me—yes, suh. An when I’m dead, den you’s a –livin’ right on in Becky an’ in mah chile....In de ole days, we go t’rough dat War together, jes’ like brothers, Sam, fightin’ ‘cause dey tol’ us to fight. Den de War was ovah, an’

¹¹⁶ The title of Richard Wright’s 1938 short story collection *Uncle Tom’s Children* is an example of such an attitude.

we come home. But we got no time to rest. Dere's a new war startin' Sam, a might big war, an' we'se gonna fight agin—fight like hell. Dis time we knows what we'se fightin' fo'—yes, suh, you an' me, Sam, an' all de other poor folks. Dis time we'se a-gonna make dis a sweet lan'—sweet lan'—sweet lan' o' libe'ty.

(7-1)

Chet's monologue references the men's participation in the Great War and indicates that they fought for something that they did not understand and would not benefit from; they fought "cause dey tol' us to fight." Chet's focus now emphasizes a "new war," a *class* struggle fought between the "poor folks" and those in power. His words echo the final lines of *The Communist Manifesto*, where Marx and Engels write, "The Communists...openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!" (44). The lines also evoke *Waiting for Lefty*, Clifford Odets' famous 1935 agit-prop drama. The play ends with a worker crying, "WE'RE STORMBIRDS OF THE WORKING-CLASS. WORKERS OF THE WORLD...OUR BONES AND BLOOD! And when we die they'll know what we did to make a new world! Christ, cut us up to little pieces. We'll die for what is right!" (Odets 52). Like *Sweet Land*, *Waiting for Lefty* incorporates Marxist concepts into an American context (including the combination of Christian imagery with Marxism). *Waiting for Lefty* was produced in cities across the United States, including Los Angeles (Fearnow 373, Murphy 337), where Seiler likely would have seen a staging. Thus, while Seiler does not use the agit-prop form exemplified by *Waiting for Lefty*, the rhetoric seems familiar. While Chet doesn't reference the "WORKERS OF THE

WORLD” in his speech, he certainly advocates a “forcible overthrow” of existing social conditions in the United States.

As if to emphasize this point, Tom, the white sharecropper, enters and tells Chet he is sorry for his loss. Chet replies, “Don’t you be sorry, cropper. De meetin’s ovah, but de war’s jes’ begun...Tom, I’m joinin’ dat union” (7-2). Chet again emphasizes a new war, one on the home front that will be fought and can be won (presumably) by black and white solidarity. As the lights fade out, “the two croppers, Negro and white, stand looking at the body on the ground” (7-2). In this repetition with a difference of the optimistic ending of *On the Fields of France*, where a white and black officer die holding hands and crying “America!”, *Sweet Land* argues for a new war: one tempered by Depression-era knowledge of the horrors of racial violence and economic oppression, but one where the oppressed band together to shape America into the “Sweet Land of Liberty” of the title.

Through this ultimate depiction of violence and the strength in interracial cooperation, *Sweet Land* moves beyond the gentility of earlier African American World War I plays and becomes unambiguously political. It argues that the Great Depression, with its combined economic devastation, natural disasters, and outbreak of racial bloodshed, has highlighted the need for the white and black proletariat to band together in a new war on U.S. soil. Rather than waging a war to show African Americans’ qualification for citizenship or fighting for an unbiased record of history, however, *Sweet Land* advocates a class struggle in which poor whites and African Americans are fellow travelers rather than racial antagonists who would fight together to overthrow existing racial and economic hierarchies. In this way, Seiler’s biography comes into play. One can question whether the playwright, as a white man who had Communist leanings, overlooked racial concerns in his quest to glorify interracial alliances through unions. If

so, he was not the first (or the last, as a history of the Communist Party in the U.S. shows). In fact, it is partly because of this emphasis on class issues over racial ones that *Sweet Land* remains an important testament to its particular time and place.

Hill and Silvera's 1938 *Liberty Deferred*: A Bridge Between Past and Present

Liberty Deferred, a 1938 Living Newspaper written by John Silvera and Abram Hill, covers many of the same issues as Seiler's 1937 *Sweet Land*, yet it does so in a very different style and with a much larger focus. As a Living Newspaper, it is a "found play" (Hatch 394), an experimental documentary drama that does "not rely on scenery or special effects, but rather on actors portraying scenes from actual events, supported by music and light" (Witham 78). Living Newspapers had their origins, in part, in the Bolshevik revolution: they "descended from the Soviet Red Army's *Zhivaya Gazeta* ('Alive' or 'Living Newspaper') and German and American agit-prop troupes." They "used huge casts, spectacular sets, and film, vaudeville, and agit-prop techniques to depict contemporary political and social issues in theatrical terms" (Nadler 615). At the time, the form was radical for an American theatre steeped in realism: it used "sophisticated techniques such as flash scene division, the bare stage, direct audience involvement, and Brechtian distancing; props such as portable trolleys and symbolically used stage levels; [and] the simultaneous use of live drama, movie projection, journalistic commentary, and other varieties of communication" (Craig 63). In this way, Hill and Silvera's play can be seen as participating in the cross-cultural American modernism described by Hutchinson and Jacques. Despite Living Newspapers' experimental nature, Hallie Flanagan, director of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), championed the form because it fulfilled many of the FTP's goals: "it provided parts for many actors; its reliance on newspapers and current events

meant that even the most amateur playwright could get a grip on a subject; multiple writers could be used for research; and finally the Living Newspaper, because it addressed topical subjects, challenged an audience to think about present problems” (Fraden 107). The FTP produced several successful Living Newspapers, such as *Injunction Granted* (1936), *Power* (1937), and *One Third of a Nation* (1938), that discussed issues “as diverse and controversial as agricultural reform, labor relations, public ownership of utilities, housing problems, and public health” (Nadler 615).

Liberty Deferred, in contrast, covers a large range of African American history, from Colonial America and the beginning of the African slave trade to the American Revolution, Civil War, Reconstruction, World War I, and the Great Depression. The play also explores issues as diverse as slave auctions and 1930s anti-lynching bills, and it features cameos by prominent American figures such as Crispus Attucks, Phillis Wheatley, Benjamin Franklin, John Brown, Frederick Douglass, Franz Boas, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The play opens on a Harlem nightclub where a white couple, Jimmy and Mary Lou, are drinking. Mary Lou is from the South and Jimmy is showing her the sights of New York City. They see a series of pantomimes depicting stereotypes of African Americans on the stage, screen, and radio. Jimmy and Mary Lou love it. An African American couple, Ted and Linda, dance slowly to center stage. They lament the “blindness” put in place by the media with which white Americans see African Americans (6).¹¹⁷ As Jimmy whoops and hollers for more dancing, he notes that African

¹¹⁷ All quotes are from Hill and Silvera’s 1938 *Liberty Deferred*, Unpublished ms. Box 3, Folder 22 and Box 4, Folders 1 and 2. Federal Theatre Archive. George Mason U, Virginia. It should be noted that *Liberty Deferred* is anthologized in Lorraine Brown’s *Liberty Deferred and other Living Newspapers*, but it is based on a different version. Hatch and Shine anthologize the first few scenes of the play in their *Black Theatre U.S.A.* E. Quita Craig notes that the manuscript in the archive is “rough—in several places the authors have indicated alternative staging suggestions, [...] nor does this appear to have been a final version” (64-65).

Americans are “free” and spirited (8). His comment sparks a debate between Ted and Linda about whether “freedom” has any relevance to the African American experience. Their conversation opens the play to a depiction of African American history, starting with the beginning of the African slave trade and slave labor in American colonies and ending with the discrimination of 1930s Jim Crow America. The play closes with two noteworthy scenes: “Lynchotopia” and “New Place in the Sun.” The first is a fantasyland where all lynching victims retire, and the scene presents Claude Neal telling the story of his 1934 lynching. The second, “New Place in the Sun,” is a stirring rallying cry based on the 1937 National Negro Congress.¹¹⁸ The scene shows African Americans banding together to fight for “freedom,” “equality,” and “liberty” (131), with different unions parading in and pledging interracial support. The play ends with all of the characters marching up a set of stairs, chanting “LIBERTY” and seeking “A new place in the Sun” (137).

With this broad scope, *Liberty Deferred* becomes a synthesis of all the issues presented in the previous African American World War I plays. It addresses the Jim Crow reality of twentieth-century America, including the threat of mob violence and lynching, present in the earliest post-war plays; it covers the discrimination against African American soldiers addressed in the 1920s front-line plays; it references the Great Depression and the Gold Star Mother controversy depicted in the plays of the early 1930s; and it dramatizes the interracial unionization and anti-lynching bill promoted in the 1937 *Sweet Land*. While it encompasses all the past issues, it also looks to the future: it breaks new ground by explicitly addressing the spread of stereotypes by new media such as radio and film. Several scholars note that it is a forerunner to revolutionary black theatre. As such, it is an excellent play with which to end my

¹¹⁸ Described on page 211.

examination of African American World War I drama. Like *Sweet Land, Liberty Deferred* moves beyond the gentility of the early 1930s plays, but it also shows that by 1938, World War I was part of the larger framework of African American history. The play draws from contemporary movements, such as the National Negro Congress that promoted social, class, and economic change, in an effort to connect African American experiences in the Great War to America's past as well as its future.

The production history of *Liberty Deferred*, fraught with holes in the archival record and accusations of racial discrimination, is nothing new in the history of African American World War I drama.¹¹⁹ The play was never produced, a fact that inspired contemporary protests as well as numerous scholarly hypotheses. While Abram Hill and John Silvera were working for the FTP, their supervisors suggested they collaborate on a Living Newspaper about African American history (Fraden 107, Nadler 618). Hill, born in Atlanta, Georgia on 20 January 1911 (Hamalian 353), had graduated from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and moved to New York City in 1938. There, he found employment with the play reading division of the FTP (Fraden 107). After the FTP closed, Hill went on to found the American Negro Theatre (ANT), a theatre that “helped launch the careers of many major African American performers, including Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, and Ruby Dee” (Nadler 618). Significantly less is known about Silvera, who joined the FTP as an advance publicity agent, then became a play reader (Nadler 618). In 1969 he compiled *The Negro in World War II*, a pictorial history of African American service in that conflict. These men compiled a bibliography of nearly 100 sources, from newspaper articles to politicians' speeches, on which to base their script (Nadler 618). The project received encouragement from numerous officials of the FTP, including director Hallie

¹¹⁹ Take, for example, the ending of Mary P. Burrill's *Aftermath*, which was changed to appease a 1919 white audience's distaste for African American militancy on the stage.

Flanagan (Fraden 107). In fact, in the fall of 1938, Emmet Lavery, director of the National Service Bureau, the office in charge of selecting plays for FTP productions, stated that *Liberty Deferred* “was a play the National Service Bureau was indeed proud to recommend” (Nadler 620). He even released publicity about the play. On December 10, 1938 the *New York Amsterdam News* published a review of the script. Dan Burley, the critic, called *Liberty Deferred* a “singularly thought-provoking piece of propaganda and a valuable contribution to Negro literature, whether it reaches the stage or not” (qtd. in Nadler 620). Burley’s comments proved prophetic; despite the script being revised and portions of the play being rehearsed (Brown xxii), the play never had a single contemporary performance.

The only known performance of the living newspaper was in 1977 at the New Federal Theatre in Washington, D.C. There, Frederick Lee directed an evening of excerpts from unpublished African American FTP plays. He included *Liberty Deferred’s* opening nightclub scene where African American stereotypes from the stage, screen, and airwaves parade for the white couple. Craig argues that the choice of this excerpt was ill-advised: “The nightclub fragment was well presented, but it left a totally erroneous impression with the audience of what the play was all about. What was not shown was that the entire rest of the play is devoted to shredding those stereotypes and replacing them with an authentic and tragic picture of black American history” (184). While I agree with Craig’s assessment of the folly of presenting only the “flashes,” it is important to note that the 1977 staging probably chose the opening scene because it would play well, while much of the rest of the play is static. In this way, *Liberty Deferred’s* debt to the pageant form becomes highlighted. According to pageant historian Naima Prevots, the pageant flourished in America from 1905 to 1925, with intimate ties to the reform movements popular at the time (such as “settlement-house workers, civic leaders, playground

organizers, suffrage activists, [and] educational reformers”) (1). Pageants were typically episodic in form, presented a span of history from 200 to 2,000 years, and used up to 5,000 community members-turned-performers. In some cases, the pageants played to audiences as large as 80,000 people (Prevots 3-4). The most well known African American pageant is W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Star of Ethiopia*, a 1913 spectacle that illustrated the gifts of the African race to the world, from prehistory to the twentieth century. The huge pageant included as many as 1,200 participants and played in New York City, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, and Los Angeles to audiences of “tens of thousands” (Hatch and Shine 88).¹²⁰ Yet, by the 1920s, the number of pageants in America was declining; after World War I the Progressive movement that had fueled most of the pageants was waning, and pageants “took on the connotation of...trite spectacle[s] created and staged by amateurs.” The form never regained its popularity (Prevots 9). Thus, not only in the 1970s, when Lee decided to stage only the most dynamic opening scene (and skip *Liberty Deferred’s* pageant-like four hundred year history), but also in the 1930s (with stiff competition from radio and film), *Liberty Deferred’s* large, drawn-out spectacle would have been hard for audiences to swallow.

Thus, *Liberty Deferred’s* original production was cancelled in early 1939 by Emmet Lavery (Nadler 620). His decision was met with outrage: on March 27, 1939, the Negro Arts Committee, a group of citizens “including ministers, labor leaders, both Negro and white artists, librarians, theatre committees,” composed a brief that accused the FTP of discrimination in its decision (Abramson 65). Lavery denied the charges of racism in a reply to the Committee; he wrote that, despite his initial belief in the play, *Liberty Deferred’s* script simply “did not bear up

¹²⁰ Hatch and Shine list nine other African American pageants in their introduction to the topic in *Black Theatre U.S.A.*. Titles include *The Masque of Colored America*, *Pageant of Progress in Chicago*, *Culture of Color*, *A Constellation of Women*, and *The Milestones of the Race*, all produced by HBCUs to “honor race progress and their founders” (86). Hatch and Shine also note that Willis Richardson included four African American pageants in his 1930 anthology *Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro*.

the high hopes” he had for it (Craig 64). While his excuse does hold some weight (the extant copy of *Liberty Deferred* reveals a lengthy, overstuffed script), another probable reason the production was cancelled involves the political climate surrounding the FTP at the time. As early as 1936, some members of Congress had accused the FTP of being an instrument of the Communist Party (Brown xviii), and by 1938 Martin Dies, the first chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), was calling the project a hotbed of subversive activity. The FTP was not able to defend itself convincingly, and the nation’s first attempt at a national theatre was shut down on July 30, 1939 (Brown xxi). In light of these circumstances, *Liberty Deferred* proved to be too politically charged for the moment: “Although it is possible that the FTP administrators were only anxious that the play be refined prior to performance, it seems more likely that they were delaying a production that would certainly have offended the Southern senators on the Dies Committee” (Brown xxii). The play’s ability to offend such senators lies partly in its form. In contrast to traditional plays that “hide their truths behind the mask of fiction,” Living Newspapers “purport to depict reality itself: they drop (or at least affect to drop) this mask” (Nadler 616).¹²¹ *Liberty Deferred*, like two other Living Newspapers dealing with African Americans written for the FTP,¹²² was too close to reality, and had to be, in the words of Rena Fraden, “deferred indefinitely” (108).

¹²¹ Nadler’s comments evoke comparisons to Baker’s theories of specifically African American modernism, especially to the strategy of “deformation of mastery,” where, “rather than concealing or disguising in the manner of the *cryptic* mask (a colorful mastery of codes), the phaneric mask is meant to advertise. It distinguishes rather than conceals” (51). Thus, another possibility for *Liberty Deferred*’s suppression is that it was too brash in its combination of experimental form and content for the white leaders of the FTP.

¹²² Ward Courtney’s 1938 *Stars and Bars*, and Elmer Rice’s proposed *The South*. None of these Living Newspapers about African American experiences were produced by the FTP. For a complete discussion of each Living Newspaper, see Paul Nadler’s article “Liberty Censored: Black Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project.”

The primary “old” issue that *Liberty Deferred* addresses is that of America as a zone of unending war for African Americans. In a new twist, however, the play actually reaches back far enough into history to reference two of the wars fought on United States soil: the American Revolution and the Civil War. In this way, *Liberty Deferred* addresses the issue with more complexity than did previous plays and shows that African American discrimination during and after World War I had links to the founding of the nation. The play’s focus on the American Revolution juxtaposes the official war against England with the unofficial war for freedom from slavery. For example, as sounds of musket and cannon shots fill the air and the Liberty Bell and Declaration of Independence are projected onto a scrim, Thomas Jefferson appears and reads, “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (20). At the same time, one sees an overseer cracking a bullwhip and the loudspeaker states: “At the time of the American Revolution there are two hundred and six thousand slaves in both Virginia and Maryland!...South Carolina in 1776 produces fifty-five thousand tons of rice for export!” (19-20). This juxtaposition of the American *ideals* of equality and liberty with the American *reality* of discrimination and human bondage shows that the “Great Experiment” was intimately linked to racist thought and practices. In fact, the scene implies that the economic growth of the colonies (and thus, their ability to secede from Britain) was due to the large amounts of raw goods the colonies could export because of slave labor. This contradiction did not go unnoticed at the time of the American Revolution. For example, English abolitionist Thomas Day wrote in 1776, “If there be an object truly ridiculous in nature, it is an American patriot signing resolutions of independence with the one hand and with the other brandishing a whip over his affrighted slaves” (qtd. in Armitage 77). This image is replicated almost exactly in

Liberty Deferred, showing that the irony of the situation also was not lost on a 1938 audience. Ultimately, the scene shows that the young nation's democracy had not freedom but slavery at its core.¹²³

This theme is continued in *Liberty Deferred's* depiction of the Civil War. At first, the Living Newspaper highlights the official war between the North and the South by bringing President Abraham Lincoln onto the stage: "I hereby declare a state of warfare exists between the United States of America and against those states in rebellion" (46). From offstage, one hears "reports of cannon [and] flashing of telegraph keys. Bugle calls and the singing of a song: 'Marching Through Georgia'" (46). The song, penned by Henry C. Worth in 1865, celebrates General William Tecumseh Sherman's "March to the Sea" that split the Confederacy in half and crippled its ability to fight (Allred 118). It became wildly popular in the North and, predictably, despised in the South (Allred 118). In the play, the song is used to signal Northern victory and the coming of Reconstruction. Yet these references to a government-sanctioned war are immediately contrasted to the unofficial war raging in the South: the birth of the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction. According to J. Michael Martinez, Klan historian, the group originated in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1866 (7). The founding members were six returning Confederate soldiers who found their town, changed forever by the Emancipation Proclamation, the physical destruction of the war, and natural disasters, a poor substitute for the excitement of battle. To deal with their ennui and the radically transformed Reconstruction-era South, they formed a secret society, a move that Martinez notes was not unusual for the time period. He lists the Klan,

¹²³ The scene anticipates Toni Morrison's discussion of American notions of freedom in her 1992 *Playing in the Dark*: "The concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery" (38). While *Liberty Deferred* definitely highlights an ironic connection between slavery and U.S. democracy, Morrison develops the idea further. She explicitly argues that slavery created Jefferson's conception of freedom.

the Knights of the White Camellia, and the White Brotherhood as contemporary groups that “serve[d] as social and political outlets for disgruntled whites that felt alienated from the normal channels of political participation and free expression” (10). The Klan began its life with “pranks,” such as ludicrous initiation ceremonies, but by 1867,¹²⁴ when “armed confrontations erupted in many Southern states as Presidential Reconstruction gave way to Radical Reconstruction controlled by Congress” (13), the group turned to increasingly violent activities, including night rides to African Americans’ houses (Martinez 14). In a short time, the Klan “became an outlet for resisting Reconstruction through secret, armed disobedience” (Martinez 16), and chapters spread throughout the South and parts of the Midwest. By 1868, the group was a known terrorist organization, and acts of Klan-sponsored violence became commonplace (Martinez 25).

In contrast to this rather grassroots genesis of the Ku Klux Klan described by historians, *Liberty Deferred* portrays a specifically top down, class-based motivation for the group’s origin. By presenting this class-conscious history of the Klan, the play is in tune with its historical moment in the 1930s, a time particularly infused with large-scale union movements and concern about class issues.¹²⁵ *Liberty Deferred*, written roughly sixty years after the birth of the Ku Klux Klan, focuses on landed-elites’ hand in forming the group. The play shows two “Bourbons,” Southern landowners who have been representatives of slaveholders throughout the play’s exploration of the eighteenth century, commenting on Reconstruction-era politics. One says,

¹²⁴ Martinez notes that “it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when the group adopted a more sinister purpose than silly play-acting, but the transformation probably occurred in 1867” (13).

¹²⁵ From 1935-1937, for example, large-scale industrial unionism burst onto the national stage, particularly with the 1935 birth of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) (McElvaine 290). The 1930s also saw a surge in membership in Marxist organizations, such as the peak of American Communist Party membership in 1934 with nineteen thousand Party members (13% of whom were African American) (Hutchinson 71).

“Free black votes and white capital won’t mix.” The second adds, “We’ve got to act—and quickly...The Blacks hate the crackers...That’s our cue...We control the money...Now the point is to keep them mad as hell at one another...the rest is easy” (49). In the face of the sweeping changes of Emancipation and Reconstruction, the Bourbons realize that one way to maintain their economic dominance is to pit the poor of both races against one another. The scene cuts to a meeting of ragged Confederate Soldiers who represent different white supremacist groups. At the urging of the Bourbons, the disparate groups merge to form the Ku Klux Klan. The first Bourbon states, “Getting all Louisiana organized, is all right. But there are similar groups in Texas, Georgia, North and South Carolina...in fact everywhere...We want all of you drawn into one strong mask...THE SOUTHERN CROSS.” As he says this, a large white cross is projected onto the scrim. One of the soldiers asks, “How can we get away with such a large program?” The second Bourbon hands him a white robe and answers, “With this! Put it on” (52). The hooded robe and the burning cross of the Ku Klux Klan are tools the men use to signal their unity (as well as a way to shield their identities, in the case of the robes), and are the perfect answer to the men’s question about how to unify disparate white supremacist groups and spread the Klan’s message. In *Liberty Deferred*, the fact that both the costume and the ritual are introduced by the Bourbons emphasizes the class-based motivations behind the organization. It also echoes Arthur Raper’s 1933 assertion that Black Belt lynchings were specifically economically inflected, a “business transaction” meant to consolidate the Bourgeoisie’s economic power (57); in this case, it is the Klan, rather than lynchings, that the landowners are wielding for economic gain.

The scene closes, however, by dramatizing the connection between the Klan and lynchings and emphasizing the class and economic power at stake in such actions. It depicts a Klan lynching, the ultimate expression of the white bourgeoisie’s attempt to control the African

American working class. Stage directions note: “A blaze of fire appears from the left. Wild cries of hysterical Negroes escaping Klansmen is [*sic*] heard outside. The Negro assemblymen escape. The tromp of horses of the Night Riders. The lash of the whip. The voice of the lynch mob screaming ‘lynch em-burn ‘em—kill ‘em [...] The song of the Klan echoes above the turmoil” (56) Here, the Civil War battle field, depicted earlier with the song “March to the Sea”, has been replaced by the night raids of the Ku Klux Klan and the group’s anthem. The reference to “Negro assemblymen” evokes the era of Reconstruction and the class and economic threats that African American office holders posed to white landowners and workers. In this way, *Liberty Deferred* again takes a major theme of earlier African American World War I drama (the home front as a war zone) and gives it more complexity, addressing the historical facts of the nation’s growth but also emphasizing the economic underpinnings of much of that history.

With the play’s multifaceted depiction of the American Revolution and the Civil War, it is perhaps not surprising that *Liberty Deferred* also focuses on the problems inherent in African Americans fighting for democracy in World War I. It does this two ways: first, by showing the discrimination African American soldiers faced in the conflict; and second, by presenting the African American Gold Star Mothers’ plight. As Ted and Linda watch a Fourth of July parade, they comment on African American soldiers’ contributions to the military. The scene dissolves into an episode where African American veterans from different wars are seen in their uniforms. One is Thomas Dent, a veteran of the Great War who has just been denied promotion. Dent responds, “But Sir, I was awarded the Croix De Guerre and decorated for valor by the French Army.” His superior replies, “I know Dent but we still aren’t recommending any promotion for you.” When pressed, the Officer says, “if you must know—it’s this—the official report reads that ‘because of qualities inherent to his race the Negro is incapable of any leadership ability’” (58).

In this vignette, *Liberty Deferred* revisits a major issue of 1920s African American World War I plays: the denigration of African American service in the military. The episode highlights the racism and discrimination embedded in the very system African American soldiers risked their lives for, and the “official report” read to Dent has its roots in actual Great War reports stating that African Americans were unfit for military service (Barbeau 153-54). Later in the episode, two ghosts, a World War I veteran and Crispus Attucks, the first man to die in the American Revolution, comment on the Independence Day parade in front of them. The World War I veteran says, “I died for Democracy, and if you ask me, Cris, what you got bumped off for in 1770 and for what that Hun stuck that bayonet through me in 1918 was just so much bunk.” Attucks responds, “But I got a statue in Boston Commons.” The soldier interrupts, “Yeah and I got a Croix De Guerre...So what?” The men agree that they were fools, and decide to watch the parade, filled with “new fools in the making” (62). The episode, reminiscent of *Aftermath* and John’s disillusionment with the American fight for democracy, also focuses on the worthlessness of token honors. Like Chet’s war medal in *Sweet Land*, the vignette shows that Attucks’ statue and the soldier’s Croix De Guerre mean nothing without significant changes on the home front. By pairing the World War soldier with Attucks, the scene underscores the link in history between the two: both fought and died (as heroes), yet American society still denies them full citizenship. It shows that African Americans’ “war” for equality is the longest one in United States history: spanning not four years, but hundreds. And, seen from the vantage point of an audience mired in the financial and racial turmoil of the Great Depression, the scene highlights the fact that not only was the country bankrupt; so to were the nation’s tokens of honor.

Liberty Deferred also references the Great War by dramatizing the plight of African American Gold Star Mothers. When Linda’s mother, clutching a gold star flag, enters to join the

Fourth of July parade, the parade dissolves into the “Hoboken Docks, Summer 1930.” One sees a pair of friends who are Gold Star Mothers, one white and one black, chatting as they walk up the pier. As they near the boat, they are separated. The white woman says, “This is awful. How absurd. Do you think our dead sons in France will be in separate cemeteries?” The Guard replies that he “wouldn’t be surprised.” In a move taken directly from the newspaper accounts of the incident, the African American woman states, “I won’t go I won’t go. If I must be thrown on a run down cattle boat like that...If this is what my boy laid down his life for then damn the man that put a gun in his hand...and praise the bullet that struck him down” (61). Her refusal to accept the unequal treatment during a trip meant to honor her son’s sacrifice mirrors the actual response the government’s Jim Crow accommodations received, with more than four hundred African American women refusing to take the trip. Yet, a loudspeaker pipes in President Hoover’s answer: “The government’s plan remains unchanged” (61). This episode brings up an important issue from the early 1930s, and it mirrors the background of May Miller’s 1929 *Stragglers in the Dust*, yet the African American mother’s statement, “praise the bullet that struck him down” seems to infuse the scene with a late-Depression militancy. Thus, while no change has been made in the government’s stance toward African American mothers over the course of the decade, the playwrights’ depiction of the Gold Star Mother seems to have shifted from resigned mourner to active protester. With the depictions of World War I as small episodes in the larger span of the play, however, which also includes the American Revolution and the Civil War, *Liberty Deferred* also seems to locate the Great War within the larger scope of African American history.

The second major issue that *Liberty Deferred* revisits from earlier African American World War I drama is lynching, yet the Living Newspaper transforms the issue by using fantasy

and humor to broach the terrifying realities of violence in America. The fact-based episodes of *Liberty Deferred* dissolve into Lynchtopia, the “fabled land where all lynch victims go” and where the “Keeper of records,” “an official looking Negro dressed in a white robe and wearing the insignia of Lynchtopia (a rope around his neck)” greets each new victim. As the new year of 1937 begins, he tells the audience, “Thirteen new members for the year. Thirteen—exactly one half of last year. I wonder what 1937 will bring. The decline is no sign though. Let’s see. What’s the total number of members now, 5,107 since 1882” (104). The Keeper presents important statistics: twenty-six men murdered by lynch mobs in 1935, down to thirteen in 1936. The decrease in the number of lynchings was due to several factors, including pressure from the NAACP, increased media exposure, and shifting public opinion, seen in the close defeat of federal anti-lynching bills in 1922 and 1935 (Levine 162).¹²⁶ Yet even the decline seems inconsequential in comparison to the total number of lynchings since 1882, a number so large it calls into question Jefferson’s earlier claims of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (20), America’s overarching claims of democracy. The Keeper’s next lines, however, bring a new flavor to the presentation of lynching in African American World War I plays. He states, “Old Judge Lynch is really doing his stuff. Wouldn’t surprise me if they didn’t send Walter White down to join us” (104). The Keeper seems to be satirizing lynchings here, joking that “Judge Lynch,” a phrase originally coined in 1840 to refer to the “imaginary authority from whom the sentences of lynch law are jocularly said to proceed” (OED), is being terribly efficient. He also jokes that Walter White, the secretary for the NAACP who led a crusade against lynching in the 1930s (Levine 162) and who wrote *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (1929), might very well be their next member.

¹²⁶ Later, in 1937, 1939, and 1940, anti-lynching legislation also passed the House but was defeated in the Senate (Levine 162).

The tongue-in-cheek attitude continues when the Keeper holds a story-telling competition among all of the victims to determine whose lynching was the worst. Claude Neal, whose 1934 murder was broadcast by the telephone, radio, and newspapers, tells his story of excursion trains full of people running to his lynching, just like a tourist attraction, and wins the contest (108).¹²⁷ This humor signals a very different treatment of lynching than those of previous Great War plays. *Aftermath*, for example, gives second-hand reports of a lynching. *Sweet Land*, in contrast, takes the graphic and shocking approach of actually showing a lynched man swinging from a tree. *Liberty Deferred*, written the next year, does the opposite. It uses humor to broach a subject so horrible African American and white audience members might tune it out otherwise. This approach is in keeping with the playwrights' beliefs about the power of comedy. Silvera, responsible for imagining Lynchotopia, stated, "nothing is more effective than ridicule and humor. And I think people get tired of the serious preaching about some of the things that are wrong, civil wrongs. And if you can laugh them out of existence, maybe you'd do a more effective job" (Silvera). This notion, of humor being used as a subversive tool, has a long history in African American life and literature in the U.S.¹²⁸ With its inventive presentation of Lynchotopia, *Liberty Deferred* connects to this tradition. It uses fantasy and humor to critique the nation; underneath the jokes, the episode reveals that, as long as lynching runs unchecked in

¹²⁷ For a more complete discussion of Claude Neal's lynching, see note 107, page 179.

¹²⁸ See Glenda R. Carpio's *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (2008), Mel Watkins's *African American Humor: The Best Black Comedy from Slavery to Today* (2002) and *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock* (1994), and Bambi Haggins's *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (2007). Carpio specifically investigates the relationship between violence and humor: "For centuries, in fact, African Americans have faced racism, in its various manifestations and guises, with a rich tradition that, instead of diminishing the dangers and perniciousness of racism, highlights them...Black American humor began as a wrested freedom, the freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel in order to create distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community" (4).

America, the nation can never be the “utopia” founding fathers envisioned. Rather, the United States has become “Lynchotopia.”

While *Liberty Deferred* addresses those issues central to earlier African American World War I plays, such as lynching and America as an unending zone of war, it also breaks new ground in its quest to highlight and contest stereotypes perpetuated by the burgeoning film and radio industries. Where earlier plays (specifically *Aftermath*, *On the Fields of France*, and *Everyman’s Land*) combated the lingering stereotypes of the minstrel stage, *Liberty Deferred* attacks the stereotypes circulated by twentieth-century mass media equivalents. The play broaches these stereotypes through the opening night club scene. While Jimmy and Mary Lou (the white couple) sit in the Harlem club, six “flashes” of different African American stereotypes dance before them, parodies of parodies. The footnotes state, “these are some representative flashes which should all be done in an elaborate, satirical manner—the object of which is to portray the Negro as he is too often shown on the *screen*, stage, and over the *air*” (emphasis added 5). I highlight the words “screen” and “air” because these two media, in contrast to the theatre, were relatively new in 1938.¹²⁹ Yet both had deep roots in American racism. For example, Peter Stanfield, in “‘An Octoroon in the Kindling’: American Vernacular and Blackface Minstrelsy in 1930s Hollywood,” writes that Hollywood films repurposed the racist tropes of blackface minstrelsy for movie-going audiences (407). Similarly, the most popular radio show during the Great Depression was “Amos ‘n Andy,” a program featuring white men in blackface (Lewis 29).¹³⁰

¹²⁹ The first American radio broadcast occurred during the fall of 1920 (Lewis 26), and while American cinema began in the late 19th century, Hollywood filmmaking took off in 1915 with W.D. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (Rogan 190).

¹³⁰ Lewis notes that “Amos ‘n Andy” was so popular, its stars made \$100,000 in 1933, more than Babe Ruth, the president of the network, or the President of the nation (29).

Yet the framing of this moment is also important; the “flashes” take place on a stage within a stage. The white couple, symbolic of “White Supremacy” that “insist[s] upon seeing” African Americans only in this light (5), sits on the secondary stage and watches the African American caricatures, but they do not see the parody. They believe they are seeing “true Negro” spirit, exemplified when Jim, the white man, comments that the African Americans they are watching are “Completely abandoned. Free as the air!” (8). His response perhaps mirrors those of white radio listeners who believed the presentation of African Americans in “Amos ‘n Andy” was accurate. Yet the black couple, Ted and Linda, perceive the parody. They act almost as interpreters for the audience (which would have been a mixed FTP audience) in case some members would not perceive the distortions. In this way, *Liberty Deferred* is what Gates would call “double voiced discourse”; it presents “repetition with a signal difference” (51) with the “flashes” as parodies of parodies (as opposed to *Sweet Land’s* rather flat employment of stereotypes). Additionally, the use of devices on stage to frame and distance the material seem to reference the alienation effect of epic theatre, an allusion that was very timely because Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator, a German director who influenced Bertolt Brecht’s ideas on epic theatre, both visited New York in the late 1930s (Wilmeth 377) and Hill would study under Piscator in 1939.¹³¹ Thus, *Liberty Deferred* seems to meld the theories of an early epic theatre

¹³¹ Brecht visited New York in 1935 and during his stay met Joseph Losey and John Houseman, important contributors to the Federal Theatre Project (Fuegi 338). Piscator came to New York (via Paris, where he had gone to escape Hitler’s Germany) to head the Dramatic Workshop in the New School of Social Research, “staging over 100 experimental works” (Wilmeth 377) from 1939 to 1951 (Brockett 412). Brecht, who worked with Piscator from 1927-28 and had “become thoroughly familiar with Piscator’s views and methods,” would not immigrate to the United States until 1941 (Brockett 415). Hill, while working for the FTP, “obtained a Theresa Helbrun Scholarship at the New School for Social Research to study playwriting with John Gassner and Erwin Piscator” (Hill and Hatch 348-49). It was during this mentorship that Hill wrote his most well known play, *On Striver’s Row*.

and Henry Louis Gates, an interesting mix that emphasizes the political intent of the play and underscores the racist caricatures of African Americans in 1930s American media.

This focus on media stereotypes is highlighted by the exact “flashes” of stereotypes in *Liberty Deferred*. Jimmy and Mary Lou see a “team of Big Apple dancers,” young African Americans swing dancing. Next comes a Red Cap who, “in the idealized manner of the Railroad advertisements, smiles broadly, bowing and scraping as he accepts an imaginary tip.” Third, a group of cotton pickers, “the musical comedy version of them—in pastel-shaded sateen overalls, pretty straw hats, [and] gay bandanas around their necks,” parades onto the stage. Fourth, the couple sees a group of African American men playing craps. Fifth, they watch “Two Black Crows,” a “buffoonish” African American blackface vaudeville act. Last, they see an old “Uncle Tom Negro” who speaks to a judge; the scene “should aim at a re-enactment of the thousand-versioned classic about what the old darky said to the Judge” (4-5). These images represent a wide variety of twentieth-century media: the Red Cap references advertisements (see Appendix C), the old man with the judge dramatizes a joke cycle (see Appendix D), the “Black Crows,” a white act for white audiences, reference American radio programs that refashioned blackface vaudeville for a radio audience (see Appendix E), and the cotton pickers could be the Broadway version of the plantation myth. Three of the six “flashes” also reference the American film industry: the Big Apple dancers were featured in at least one film in 1938 (Wilkinson 1) (see Appendix F), the cotton pickers are described as “the popular Hollywood version of the plantation worker singing at his work,” and the craps shooters are “the Hollywood version of the Negro at his ‘favorite pastime’” (4-5). After presenting these stereotypes, *Liberty Deferred* spends the rest of its time breaking them down by dramatizing African Americans’ humanity and history; it features Ted and Linda, as contrasts to the media stereotypes, critiquing the racism of

the white couple and American society at large. Craig, scholar of African American Federal Theatre Project drama, concurs and argues that after the “flashes,” “the entire rest of the play is devoted to shredding those stereotypes and replacing them with an authentic and tragic picture of black American history” (184). In this way, *Liberty Deferred* attempts to answer the film and radio stereotypes, breaking new ground for African American World War I plays.

Liberty Deferred also moves beyond the gentility of earlier World War I plays; through its militant final episode, it can be seen as a bridge to later African American theatre. This trait can be seen most clearly in the final episode, titled “A New Place in the Sun.”¹³² As the lights come up, one sees a busy train station with a flight of stairs at the back of the stage. An announcer states, “Train on track three...for Philadelphia...the National Negro Congress special leaves in two minutes” (129). The announcer references the second National Negro Congress (NNC), held in Philadelphia in 1937 and attended by more than 1,000 delegates representing twenty-seven states and numerous countries (Hutchinson 171). The NNC was started in 1935 as the brainchild of the American Communist Party to “unite black professionals, workers, and Communists in a joint program to combat segregation and economic injustice” (Hutchinson “Blacks and Reds” 157). The idea was taken up by “young NAACP militants” who were frustrated that the NAACP was focused on lynching rather than economic issues in the decade. Officially started at Howard University by John P. Davis, an African American attorney, A. Philip Randolph, African American labor leader and editor of the Socialist *Messenger*, and Ralph Bunche, Howard University political scientist, the main purpose of the organization was to “improv[e] the economic status of blacks through the organization of integrated trade unions” (Levine 162). There was a strong Communist element to the Congress, however, as the Party

¹³² This title is perhaps referencing George Wells Parker’s 1918 book *The Children of the Sun*, which revealed the African origins of classical Greek civilization.

strove to fulfill Moscow's 1935 "Popular Front strategy" that "dictated that Communists push for the broadest cooperation possible with black moderates" (Hutchinson "Blacks and Reds" 157). The Party had to keep these objectives fairly veiled, however, to appeal to the African American leaders who might attend and the African American press. For instance, Randolph, President of the Congress, would only agree to take the position after he had been assured that the NNC would not be focused on Communism: he "had to have that assurance, since he had long suspected that the Communists wanted to control black organizations for their own self-serving political ends" (Hutchinson "Blacks and Reds" 161).

It is this radical movement which *Liberty Deferred* dramatizes. Ted and Linda, the African American couple, agree to take part in the Congress. The stage swells with participants chanting "On to Philadelphia / On to Liberty / On to Equality / Come on every black man who wants to be free. / Free. / A NEW PLACE IN THE SUN" (130). The leader of the Congress (presumably Randolph) speaks: he advocates "Mass Action, one for all, all for one, complete unity with all liberal groups, let the underdogs of all the world join with us" (131). The crowd cheers, and numerous interracial labor unions parade onto the stage.¹³³ The speaker again takes center stage and makes his demands: the "passage of the Anti-lynching bill...equal opportunities in education...the same chances in the army, navy, and the planes that ride the waves of the clouds" (134). While these demands are nothing new (the demand for an end to lynching, education reform, and true equality in the U.S. military resonates with all of the African American World War I plays), the specific language used has a particularly Communist inflection. For example, the leader's call for "Mass Action" with all of the "underdogs of the world" echoes the final line of Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto*: "WORKING MEN OF

¹³³ The importance of the parade and spectacle here link *Liberty Deferred* to American pageants popular in the first two decades of the Twentieth Century (discussed in more depth on page 196).

ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!” (44). Similarly, Randolph’s actual speech at the 1937 NNC “struck the ‘Popular Front’ high note,” according to historian Earl Hutchinson (“Blacks and Reds” 172), even though Randolph himself was wary of Communist interference in African American organizations. In the speech, Randolph “sounded the alarm against the fascists. He recited the familiar list of abuses against blacks and workers, and he demanded that the nation stop ‘trampling on Negroes’ rights.” He also stated, “‘Let us build a united front in cooperation with the progressive and liberal agencies of the nation whose interest are common with Black America,’” the sentence Hutchinson points to as Randolph’s particularly “Popular Front” moment (qtd. in Hutchinson “Blacks and Reds” 172). Yet, *Liberty Deferred’s* final emphasis on equality in the armed forces, specifically the reference to airplanes (not used widely until World War II) and Randolph’s actual reference to fascism, signals a new focus: the war brewing with Germany that would break out in Europe the following year (1939).¹³⁴ In this way, *Liberty Deferred* looks to the future and the new conflict that would usurp the Great War as the century’s focus.

The references to the stirrings of World War II, however, are not the only ways *Liberty Deferred* goes beyond its historical moment. The play also can be seen as a bridge from 1930s African American drama to the Black Arts Movement (BAM) of the 1960s. Craig argues,

If we examine the ideology of Black Revolutionary Theatre, we also find that the black dramatists of the thirties...project precisely the ideas that became the

¹³⁴ This emphasis proved prophetic; Randolph, as a leader of the National Negro Congress, used his position to force the government to outlaw discrimination and segregation in U.S. defense work: “On June 25, 1941, President Roosevelt, alarmed by the possibility of the march [threatened by Randolph], signed Executive Order 8802. It barred racial discrimination by employers that held government contracts and also prohibited discrimination in federal training programs for defense production. The order also established a Fair Employment Practices Commission to promote compliance with the order” (Levine 163).

nucleus of the black revolutionary doctrine... Without any formal codification of their purpose, these pioneers were firmly 'committed' to revolutionary change both in black drama and the black community, and they fought against enormous odds to precipitate it. (193)

Craig outlines the "black revolutionary doctrine" as 1) fighting against myths and stereotypes of African Americans, 2) reflecting "authentic" African American identities in "specific black historical or cultural situations," and 3) using African American "wit," "imagery," and "expression" (193). *Liberty Deferred* does all of these: it presents stereotypes of the stage, screen, and air in order to refute them; it covers all of African American history in America in order to present Jimmy and Mary Lou, stand-ins for white America, with "authentic" situations and people; and it incorporates African American humor and vernacular into its episodes. Clearly, there are aspects of the play that BAM followers would take issue with, such as the emphasis on interracial cooperation through labor unions and the explicit agit-prop ending, but those differences do not diminish the links between the two periods of drama. In this way, *Liberty Deferred* projects a large move away from the genteel dramas of the early 1930s and pushes ahead as a forerunner of militant drama in the 1960s.

Ultimately, all of these aspects of *Liberty Deferred* can be encapsulated in the play's title. A forerunner of Langston Hughes's 1951 poem "Harlem,"¹³⁵ it implies that the playwrights, "like Langston Hughes [...], saw the American dream not as denied outright to African Americans, but as postponed to some indefinite and unacceptable future" (Craig 618). The title

¹³⁵ Hughes's poem, published in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, was the inspiration for the name of Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 hit, *Raisin in the Sun*. Additionally, Hughes is also widely held as the master of the humor and parody tradition in African American literature. Thus, *Liberty Deferred*, with its use of humor as a subversive tool, is not just a predecessor of Hughes's poem, but is perhaps a forerunner of Hughes's style.

addresses how African Americans kept hoping that serving in American wars (at home and abroad) would better African American lives in the United States, and how those hopes continued to be dashed. The title also addresses the ongoing fight against lynching and racist media stereotypes, issues that were not resolved in the 1930s or any subsequent decade. Interestingly, just as Hughes's poem ends with the threat of an explosion of pent up anger and violence ("or will it explode"), *Liberty Deferred* also ends with a radical call for justice, threatening mass action if the group (defined racially but also as a class) is not given a "NEW PLACE IN THE SUN" (130). In this way, the play forecasts African American concerns with the U.S. military, industry, and society in the Second World War, and it also shows a link to the more radical African American theatre of the 1960s. *Liberty Deferred* might never have been produced, but it is an important milestone in African American World War I drama because it provides not just the capstone to African American plays focusing on the Great War, but also a thread to future wars and African American theatre movements.

Epilogue: Legacies

...*We're hitching a ride into eternity! We need you and everyone who follows you to carry us with you. If you remember our story—our whole story—to the future, then you will know peace.*
Lydia, in *False Creeds* (2007)

To close this study of African American plays about World War I, I find it fitting to take a brief glance at a new play, *False Creeds*, written by emerging playwright Darren Canady. The drama, which debuted at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta in February 2007, literally brings memories and documents of the 1921 Tulsa race riots to life. Its protagonist, Jason, is a 1990s college student whose ailing grandmother gives him a memory box containing documents pertaining to her family's unspoken history, namely the Tulsa riots—riots that burned the prosperous African American neighborhood of Greenwood to the ground and killed and dispossessed hundreds of African Americans. Together, the pair experience “visions” that transport them back to that time and place, and Jason discovers not only his ancestors' material wealth but also the terror and injustice they endured during and after the riots. Ultimately, Jason learns that his family's story, like the tale of the title character in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, must be “passed on”: by carrying on his ancestors' story, Jason allows them finally to rest in peace.

Like the African American World War I plays, *False Creeds* places great emphasis on making buried history visible; Jason makes it clear that his family has never spoken of this history, and in general the Tulsa Race Riots remain outside of dominant American history, “brush[ed]...brush[ed]...brush[ed]...under the rug” (77). In fact, Jason's dead great-grandmother's final speech, which I use to begin this epilogue, emphasizes the importance of bringing such history to light. Lydia states, “We're not trying to hurt you Jason! We're hitching a ride into eternity! We need you and everyone who follows you to carry us with you. If you remember our story—our whole story—to the future, then you will know peace” (84). The odd

wording of the final sentence, when Lydia asks Jason to “remember” their story “to the future,” highlights the importance of (re)membering African American history, or of piecing together the whole “body” of experiences for future generations to know.¹³⁶ While Lydia’s lines really refer only to the Tulsa Riots, they also can be thought of as pertaining to the overarching message of the African American World War I plays: they demand attention be paid to the suppressed and repressed experiences of the “Great War for Democracy.”

In this way, *False Creeds* could be counted as a twenty-first-century Great War play. Admittedly, World War I is not the play’s focus, but the aftermath of the Great War is seen plainly in Greenwood’s prosperity (including the great-grandfather’s role as a gun wielding, militant New Negro) and in the machinery of the race riot. Dialogue reveals that the white mob uses a World War I military-issued machine gun, and as the women flee Tulsa they are fired upon by a National Guard plane left over from the war. In fact, *False Creeds* seems to touch on many of the main issues of all of the different groups of African American World War I plays. Like Dunbar-Nelson and Burrill, Canady dramatizes the tension surrounding African American men arming themselves and fighting for “democracy” at home. Similarly, the literal references to World War I and the portrayal of Tulsa as a horrific killing field echo Cotter’s and Edmonds’s portrayals of French battlefields as mere substitutes for the American racial war. There are also links to Miller’s and Hughes’s ghostly texts, with the characters of Jason and his grandmother moving between the living and the dead with their gift of “vision.” The issue of place and the memorials that mark it, central to Miller’s and Hughes’s plays, also becomes important in *False Creeds*; Jason ends the play holding a jar of dirt scavenged from his ancestors’ farm, and at one

¹³⁶ While my wording here, (re)membered, highlights a bodily metaphor, it also calls to mind Toni Morrison’s theory of “rememory” articulated in *Beloved*. In the novel, “rememory” refers to the idea of a collective memory that circulates in the past and present.

point he digs through red Oklahoman dirt to find the mass grave where his great-grandfather lies. Both become symbols of remembrance for the places and people he came from. Additionally, Canady's play, with its newspaper clippings and journals that come to life, is reminiscent of the living newspaper style employed by Hill and Silvera in *Liberty Deferred*. Like that play and Seiler's drama, *False Creeds* deals with economic and class fissures that are both inter- and intra-racial. Jason's ancestors learn that the riots were in part motivated by white desire for their land, and the play highlights the clear class hierarchies between different groups of African Americans in Greenwood. Ultimately, it seems fitting that a contemporary play literally and thematically reaches back to the African American World War I plays; the issues highlighted by those plays, written between 1918-1938, are still relevant in the twenty-first century.

Many of the themes and techniques used in the World War I plays have reappeared in later twentieth- and twenty-first-century African American drama. One such recurring theme is the depiction of the home front of America as a still active, changing battlefield. While playwrights associated with the Black Arts Movement (BAM) have portrayed the United States in this light, their presentations of the theme do vary. Amiri Baraka's (LeRoi Jones) *Dutchman* (1964) depicts an allegorical war between whites and blacks with Clay, a young African American man, being lulled into a feeling of safety and control only to end up being killed in a ritualistic white stabbing. On the same allegorical level, but with a different focus, Ed Bullins in *Black Commercial #2* (1967) presents a commentary on intra-racial violence in America. The short "commercial" consists of two anonymous black youths trying to kill each other while a crowd around them coaxes them into self-love (and thus love for one another). In contrast, Ben Caldwell's *Prayer Meeting: or, The First Militant Preacher* (1967) uses realism to dramatize African Americans taking up arms in the fight for radical revolution. Additionally, many

contemporary African American playwrights not associated with BAM or explicit militancy also explore the issue of America as a warzone. Adrienne Kennedy's *Funny House of a Negro* (1962) exposes how the African American psyche can become a tormented, creative battleground, while James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), loosely based on the murder of Emmet Till, illuminates America as a warzone of atrocities rather than the official clash of armies. Ted Shine's *Contribution* (1969) dramatizes the violence facing the Civil Rights Movement.

More recently, African American playwrights have depicted America as a war zone through a postmodern framework, presenting the nation's racial ideology as full of "complexity" and "contradiction" (Elam "Introduction" 1). For example, Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities* (1992) is a one-woman performance piece whose core event is the 1991 riot in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, sparked when a Jewish man's car struck and killed a young African American girl. The piece shows America as a complex, fragmented, often ironic and humorous, battleground. Through Deavere Smith's depiction of different community members' experiences as well as interviews with noted scientists, cultural theorists, and authors, the piece also interrogates the notion of race as a fixed biological category and instead presents race as a social construction with very real consequences for the lives of men, women, and children. Similarly, Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* (1994) explores the instability of identity and historical narratives. The play's protagonist, "the Lesser Known," makes his living impersonating the "Great Man," Abraham Lincoln, in a sideshow where white patrons pay to reenact Lincoln's assassination. The crucial difference comes from the Lesser Known's skin color; the Lesser Known says, "If you deviate too much they won't get their pleasure. That's my experience. Some inconsistencies are perpetuable because they're good for business" (Parks 163). The acceptable "inconsistenc[y]" is

that the Lesser Known is African American. By highlighting the latent desire for racial violence, Parks creates a complex dramatization of America as a postmodern warzone, a fragmented space with a kaleidoscope of races, classes, sexualities, ages, etc., that cannot be put back together. Because the theme of America as the site of an ongoing, shifting battle is so prevalent in African American drama (to say nothing of African American literature in general), the African American World War I plays become important literary and historical documents; it seems that the arc of African American drama cannot fully be understood without acknowledgement and analysis of these often forgotten and suppressed plays and history.

A second clear echo of the Great War plays in contemporary African American drama comes from the variety of experiences African American men and women have faced in (and after) military service, presented by playwrights intent on showing both the positive and negative consequences of such service. On one end of the spectrum, one sees the character Gabe in August Wilson's Pulitzer prize-winning *Fences* (1987), a veteran who suffered a traumatic brain injury in World War II. As compensation, the United States government has given Gabe three thousand dollars, enough to buy his brother a house. Yet the play interrogates the notion of America as a land of opportunity worth risking one's life for. Gabe's brother, Troy, who works tirelessly to provide for his family, says, "If my brother didn't have that metal plate in his head...I wouldn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. And I'm fifty-three years old" (31). Similarly, William Branch's *Medal for Willie* (1951) is a World War II play in which an African American mother refuses to accept the *Croix de Guerre* awarded to her dead son while American versions of Nazi atrocities continue at "home." While the play emphasizes inequality and hypocrisy on the home front, it also presents the African American soldier as heroic and capable, certainly deserving of a war medal whether that honor is accepted or not.

This depiction of an African American man as a war hero whose legacy affects movements for equality on the home front speaks to the time: during the Second World War, as in the First, “blacks received inferior, segregated training and served in segregated units” (Levine 167), yet this discrimination fueled the fire for ongoing Civil Rights activism. On July 26, 1948, the early Civil Rights movement made progress when President Truman signed executive orders to end discrimination in federal government employment and in the armed forces (Levine 168-176). In a post-Civil Rights America, where racial enmity to some extent was forced to go underground, playwrights found new ways to articulate racism’s subtleties and African American soldiers’ reactions to such an environment. In Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1974), one meets the infamous character Beau Willie, a Vietnam veteran intensely disturbed by his tour of duty who drops his children to their deaths out of a fifth story window. Similarly, George C. Wolfe’s *The Colored Museum* (1988) includes a monologue from the character Junie Robinson, a drug addicted Vietnam veteran who recounts his efforts to euthanize his fellow black soldiers to keep them from having to return to the horror of life in the United States after the war.¹³⁷ These last two depictions of Vietnam veterans highlight the fact that, even though segregation had been eliminated in the United States military in 1948, discrimination continued: the Vietnam War saw disproportionate numbers of African American men drafted and killed in combat, with twenty percent of black draftees ending up in

¹³⁷ In this way, Junie’s monologue is reminiscent of Angelina Weld Grimké’s groundbreaking propaganda play *Rachel* (1916), often held as the first full-length drama written by an African American woman (Hatch and Shine 133), in which the title character refuses to bring African American children into the world because they will only face heartache and racist violence, including lynching. Many contemporary critics felt that Grimké’s play preached “race suicide” through imposed sterilization or euthanasia, a view Grimké attempted to dissuade in her 1920 “The Reason and Synopsis by the Author” (Grimké 50). By using Junie’s monologue to echo this important play, Wolfe continues his project of interrogating the themes and stereotypes of African American theatre in *The Colored Museum*.

combat units and African Americans comprising more than twenty-two percent of the injured and killed in the war (Levine 198).¹³⁸ Yet these plays show that the disparities prompted unique responses from the veterans themselves. The playwrights cast African American servicemen as having important choices and decisions, choices that would affect their lives, and those of the people on the home front, forever.

It is important to note that the efforts to document and interrogate African American soldiers' experiences continue into the twenty-first century, in that the dominant culture still refuses to accord full respect to (or, in some cases, even to acknowledge) African American soldiers and their contributions to the nation. A case in point: in February 2010, the American Public Broadcasting Service debuted the documentary "For Love of Liberty: The Story of America's Black Patriots" to tell the story of those men and women who fought and died for the country, even when their loyalty was a paradox. The documentary, hosted by Halle Berry and introduced by Colin Powell, examines African American contributions to American wars from the Revolution to the current conflicts in the Middle East. Leonard Pitts, Jr., Pulitzer Prize winner and nationally syndicated columnist, reviewed the documentary and found it "moving": "One hopes they [citizens who question the 'American-ness' of African Americans] will see the stories of valor, linger upon the tombstones, watch American Marines denied seating at a table to which even Nazis are welcome, and marvel at the sheer love of country this bespeaks. Not love for the country as it is, but love for what it could someday be" ("Blacks in"). Pitts's column drew enough negative response that he felt the need to revisit the issue of African Americans in

¹³⁸ Historian Michael Levine notes several reasons for the disparities: "A major one was that most blacks had no chance to go to college and so were not eligible for the student draft deferments obtained by many whites." Also, "blacks, who had fewer educational opportunities than whites, scored lower on army tests. That prevented them from getting assigned to desk jobs. But even comparing blacks and whites who scored the same on the tests, blacks were more likely to end up in combat—therefore, racism seems to have been a factor in assigning draftees" (198).

combat in an editorial two weeks later. As Pitts relates, a reader's email claimed that Henry Johnson, the African American soldier who won the *Croix de Guerre* in World War I for slaying a company of Germans, could not have served in that capacity: "Hate to tell you that blacks were not allowed into combat intell [sic] 1947....So all that feel good, one black man killing two dozen Nazi [sic], is just that, PC bull" ("Facts No"). Despite being presented with evidence to the contrary (and seemingly having confused the First World War with the Second), the reader insisted Pitts had gotten it wrong. Pitts uses the occasion to ponder how segments of the American public (including political pundits and some in the media) have gotten to the point of relying on personal worldviews instead of facts and evidence. I found the exchange to be illuminating for a different reason: it highlights the continued need, even in 2010, to recuperate memories of African American service to the nation. The documentary underscores the need to make the basic argument that African Americans, since the beginning of the nation, have fought and died for the country.

The continued reluctance (or, in the case of Pitts's reader, seemingly willful refusal) to acknowledge this fundamental participation in the United States—the "privilege" to die for one's nation—shows that, as much as one would like to think that the racist ideologies surrounding the Great War have dissipated, they have not. Efforts to rewrite history to include African American military contributions must continue into the twenty-first century. Thus, the African American World War I plays, in their myriad efforts to "remember our story—our whole story" (Canady 84), leave behind legacies important in understanding not only African American drama's development, but also America's continuing development as a "Democracy."

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