

## University of Puget Sound Sound Ideas

---

LMDA Review

Other Publications

---

Winter 2011

# Review: The Journal of Dramaturgy, volume 21, issue 1

Liz Engelman

Mark Bly

Sydne Mahone

Debra Cardona

Fedra Chatard Carpenter

*See next page for additional authors*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/lmdareview>

---

### Recommended Citation

Engelman, Liz; Bly, Mark; Mahone, Sydne; Cardona, Debra; Carpenter, Fedra Chatard; and Ramsey-Zoe, Otis, "Review: The Journal of Dramaturgy, volume 21, issue 1" (2011). *LMDA Review*. 43.  
<http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/lmdareview/43>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Other Publications at Sound Ideas. It has been accepted for inclusion in LMDA Review by an authorized administrator of Sound Ideas. For more information, please contact [soundideas@pugetsound.edu](mailto:soundideas@pugetsound.edu).

---

**Authors**

Liz Engelman, Mark Bly, Sydne Mahone, Debra Cardona, Fedra Chatard Carpenter, and Otis Ramsey-Zoe

# Review

The Journal of Dramaturgy

Published by the  
Literary Managers and  
Dramaturgs of the Americas

ISSN 2157-1007

Volume 21, Issue 1  
Winter 2011

1986 – 2011  
**CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF REVIEW**  
1986 – 2011

## THE LESSING AWARD (2010): MARK BLY

- 3 How Do You Solve A Problem Like Mark Bly?  
An Introduction by Liz Engelman
- 5 I Begin My Dramaturgy for the 21st Century  
Lessing Award Acceptance Speech by Mark Bly

## SPECIAL ISSUE: AFRICAN AMERICAN DRAMATURGY

Sydné Mahone, Guest Editor

- 8 *Introduction*  
Shifting Boundaries: Perspectives from African American Dramaturgs  
by Sydné Mahone
- 11 Classics in a New Light: Dramaturgy at  
the Classical Theatre of Harlem  
by Debra Cardona
- 16 The Innovation of Inclusion:  
Dramaturgy in the Mythos of a “Post-Racial Era”  
by Faedra Chatard Carpenter
- 22 Back to Black: A Response to Contemplations  
on the Dramaturgical Landscape for African American Theatre  
(in a Time of Obama)  
by Otis Ramsey-Zöe



**LITERARY MANAGERS  
& DRAMATURGS  
OF THE AMERICAS**

Photos (from top)  
by Cynthia SoRelle, Jill Jones,  
and Troy Hourie

# AN OVER-ABUNDANCE OF NOTE-WORTHY CONTENT

## The 25th Anniversary Issue of *Review*

Three different headlines: what to do? I'm glad I'm not a newspaper editor. On the front page of this issue of *Review*, I have tried to represent three different milestones of note without diminishing the importance of any of them.

This issue marks the 25th anniversary of what was first published in January 1986 under the accurate if somewhat self-referential title *LMDA Newsletter*. Because there have been interruptions in production, Volume 21 marks the 25th year of publication for *Review*. A silver anniversary for LMDA's periodical, marked in the year after the organization's own 25th anniversary celebration. It's a remarkable accomplishment in which many people share credit, and one of which I'm personally quite proud, but, as ever, it's the contents of this issue that are really remarkable. My thanks to a quarter-century of contributors to *Review*!

Mark Bly is one of the most celebrated dramaturgs in our field, and his acceptance into the ranks of Lessing Award recipients marks the achievements of his career. At the 2010 LMDA conference in Banff, Canada, past president Liz Engelman introduced Bly with passion and panache. And Bly's acceptance speech was much more than an elaborate "thank you": not content to rest on his laurels, Bly articulated a vision for the future — his own future work, and, really, everybody's! I'm pleased to be able to share these speeches here.

### *Review*

#### EDITOR

D.J. Hopkins, San Diego State University

#### ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Sydney Cheek O'Donnell, University of Utah

Lauren Beck, Northwestern University

#### EDITORIAL BOARD

Maria Beach, Oklahoma State University

Louise Edwards, Northwestern University

DD Kugler, Simon Fraser University

John Lutterbie, Stony Brook University

Sydné Mahone, University of Iowa

Shelley Orr, San Diego State University

Geoff Proehl, University of Puget Sound

Judith Rudakoff, York University

Michele Volansky, Washington College

The balance of this *Review* is a Special Issue dedicated to a consideration of African American dramaturgy. I cannot express how excited I am by these articles, nor how honored I am to have worked with Guest Editor Sydné Mahone and all of the contributors. Mahone assembled the content of this special issue, and her introduction provides an insightful and inspiring mapping of the subject. My sincerest thanks to Sydné and to all the contributors for their long-term commitment to this project.

D.J. Hopkins

San Diego State University

#### LMDA HQ

PO Box 36. 20985 PACC

New York, NY 10129

800-680-2148

#### LMDA Canada

Toronto, ON

M5A3H3 Canada

416-214-1992

*Review is published twice yearly by Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas. Articles should conform to MLA format, but we are less picky about reviews, manifestoes, interviews, and other short-form submissions. Spelling differences between Canadian and US English will be preserved. As per the official name of our organization, "dramaturg" will be the default spelling of this contentious term, but we will preserve the spelling of any contributor who prefers "dramaturge." Complete editorial guidelines can be found online at LMDA's website.*

*Inquiries from prospective contributors are welcome. All inquiries should be directed to D.J. Hopkins: <dhopkins@mail.sdsu.edu>. Review Volume 21 number 1, Winter 2011.*

*This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit: <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>>.*



# THE LESSING AWARD 2010

## How Do You Solve A Problem Like Mark Bly?

### An Introduction by Liz Engelman

What do dramaturgy, art, science, music, philosophy, and fossils have in common? Mark Bly.

I've never had to do this before. I've never stood in the presence of so many esteemed colleagues, on the Silver Anniversary of an organization that I believe in so fully, to give tribute to one of its — and the profession's — Founding Fathers. I've never had such an honor, that of introducing one of my closest partners-in-dramaturgical-crime, to try to speak personally and professionally, to speak from my heart and to give voice to all of yours to honor this man, my guru-turg, with the Lessing Award, celebrating his decades-long vision for the profession, his lasting impact on this organization, and his unceasing service to our field.

But don't let me get too far in without a quote. It's not my own. I wrote and asked an array of people whom Mark has touched over the years to send me a tribute to him. Ken Lin, one of Mark's playwrighting students from the Yale School of Drama, had this to say: "I am who I am today because of Mark Bly, and I love him." When I read that sentence, it was as if Ken had reached into my heart and spoken my words for me. I know that generations of students, playwrights, dramaturgs, and directors would all say the same thing.

Okay, I'm going to paraphrase another quote: "How do you solve a problem like Mark Bly?" One of the reasons that I love Mark is that if you're looking for him, he isn't necessarily going to be sitting there in the dramaturgical abbey — I guess those are called libraries — rather, you might find him, as DD Kugler imagines him, "at his happiest, on his knees within some deserted midwestern landscape, closely observing the residue of cosmic forces." Or maybe, as Shelley Orr remembers back, you might find him "in a white shirt and striped tie, dancing with abandon under colorful lights to disco tunes on the dance floor late at night in Simon Fraser University's student Union." Or maybe you'll find him surrounded by fossils from the Ordovician period — the *middle* Ordovician period, as Geoff Proehl reminds us. Thank you, Geoff. The point is, you will find Mark Bly out in the world. If all the world's a stage for Shakespeare, for Mark the world is a laboratory, a place for exploration, discovery and alchemy; the world is an archaeological dig, a place for uncovering

LIZ ENGELMAN is a freelance dramaturg who is currently splitting her time between Whidbey Island, WA and Ely, MN. Liz has served as the Literary Director of the McCarter Theatre, the Director of New Play Development at ACT Theatre in Seattle, Washington, Literary Manager/Dramaturg at Seattle's Intiman Theatre, and as Assistant Literary Manager at Actors Theatre of Louisville. She has directed new plays at The Illusion Theatre, Mixed Blood Theatre, The Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis, and Carleton College. She studied dramaturgy and new play development at Brown and Columbia universities, where she received her BA and MFA in theatre and dramaturgy, respectively. She is a member of the New Project Group of ITI, is working with Hedgebrook, a retreat for women writers on Whidbey Island, and is the founder and co-director of Tofte Lake Center at Norm's Fish Camp, a creative retreat up in the Boundary Waters of Minnesota.



Mark Bly and Liz Engelman.  
Photo: Cindy SoRelle.

and revealing; the world is a classroom, a place for the questioning spirit. And Mark is its greatest student. All the world is indeed Mark's oyster — and we've benefited from his pearls of wisdom inside and outside the classroom.

You all have Mark's bio in front of you, so I have no need to recite it for you. In fact, even if you didn't have it, there would still be no need for me to introduce him to you; he is the living history of this organization and field. But more than that, for me, his is the living embodiment of dramaturgy. Mark is hardwired for the search; the questioning spirit is in his DNA. He's unafraid to dramaturg himself as he moves through the stages of his career, as he bestrides the academic and professional worlds like a colossus, staying in both, tending to these twin interests with two sets of eyes, and, in doing so, energizing the organization and field. Mark is a 20th and 21st century pioneer, always searching, never stopping, always on the frontier of the profession, always ahead of the curve, always sounding the wake-up call to our profession to look at ourselves, 'turg ourselves, to grow where there has never yet been fertile soil.

One of Mark's first pioneering milestones, was, if we were uncovering the fossil layers of dramaturgy, the origins of dramaturgy in the US. The Beginning Period, not the Middle Period (am I right, Geoff?). At the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis in the 1980s, Mark and cohort Michael Lupu (our most recent previous Lessing Award winner), elevated the role and function of dramaturgy to a level of importance where such renowned directors such as Liviu Ciulei, Peter Sellers, Bob Falls, and JoAnn Akalaitis began to understand and appreciate the artistic, cultural, and political impact a dramaturg could have on a production. Mark's time at the Guthrie put dramaturgy on the map and, importantly, placed it right smack in the center of the country, a geographical fact, and also an apt metaphor for the centrality the role had attained in the professional landscape.

Mark however, did not rest on these laurels. His 1986 Yale Interviews not only elevated the stature of the profession, but were also a wake-up call to the very same group. Before these interviews, there was no map, nothing with which to navigate through the early years of the profession. In interviewing the biggest names in our biz, in revealing what they strove for as well as their struggles along the way, Mark held an honest mirror up to the profession, humanizing us, and showing us what we looked like, flaws and all. Once again the searcher, once again, the profession's own dramaturg, Mark demonstrated how, if we don't change, we die. The survival of the dramaturgs would only come if we evolved beyond merely being "an in-house critic." Six months after the Yale Interviews came out, director Bob Falls wrote Mark to say, "Thank you, now I can hire a dramaturg." Mark had introduced the nature and spirit of dramaturgy to our collaborators outside our inner circle, changing the profession by opening us up to directors, Artistic Directors, and others.

It's about time for another quote. "My favorite Mark Bly story was when he called to tell me that he was letting me in the Yale Drama School based on two pages of a play I submitted. He said that if I could learn to write a whole play like those two pages, I would be a significant writer... I was so stunned (and young), I said, 'Oh my god, Mark Bly. I think you just made my life.' And the truth is, he had." Like Sarah Treem, seventy-five other playwrights who went through the Yale School of Drama under Mark's leadership, similarly

attribute their successes as writers — but more importantly, as human beings — to Mark, their mentor and Founding Father Figure. Many, like Sarah, acknowledge his gifts, hold onto the life lessons, and relish his contributions to their work.

It is significant that we are honoring Mark at the 25th Anniversary of LMDA. Mark was present at the beginning conversations in New York that led to the establishment of this very organization, and he has played an integral role in the conference planning from those early years through the next two decades. From the first formal conference at New Dramatists, to the first conference outside of NYC, in Minneapolis, Mark's stewardship helped ensure that this once small and scrappy organization would have a long life regionally outside of New York.

LMDA and dramaturgy have not only made an impact across the country, but with Mark's intrepid pioneering, it has made an impact across the border as well. One of my greatest pleasures being involved in LMDA has been the years that Mark and I rode co-saddle with Mark as Board Chair and myself as President. Mark's and my interest in putting the "Americas" in Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas led Mark to spearhead an unforgettable adventure that resulted not only in many bi-lingual laughs, private jokes, nick names, and car rides on dusty Mexican roads (buy Mark a *Michilada* and ask him to tell you the story about the dog), but in a conference in Mexico City between a delegation of North American Dramaturgs and Mexican playwrights and directors. Many relationships were solidified as a result of that international convening, and Mark helped ensure a slot in Arena Stage's season for the Mexican production of *Mestiza Power*.<sup>1</sup> What Mark accomplished in establishing the contacts, building the relationships, and realizing our dream was achieving the near impossible. We are still feeling the impact and resonance from those heretofore uncharted steps as the organization continues to expand its web of professional connections and deepen its investment in cultural exchange.

So, how do you solve a problem like Mark Bly? How do you define the undefinable? Alchemist. Shimmering Virgil. Midnight go-between. Touchstone. Life-coach. Mr. Hatchett. Generosity personified. The Best Damn Ally an Artistic Director Could Ever Have. These are all words colleagues have said of Mark as they try to crack his code. The code is in his DNA. It's that questioning spirit. I'm so glad it is such a long strand.

I could go on and on. But I'm sure Mark has a few quotes of his own he'd like to share with you. Let me end by saying yet again, how honored I am to be able to stand here and share with you my utmost love, admiration, and appreciation for Mark. He was the name in the field to me when I entered into this profession, and now, after all these years of sharing our journey together, I have come to realize just what's in a name.

Everyone, Mark Bly.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> *Mestiza Power* by Concepción Mora, translated by Harley Erdman.



# THE LESSING AWARD 2010

## I Begin My Dramaturgy for the 21st Century

### Lessing Award Acceptance Speech

by Mark Bly

MARK BLY is the Senior Dramaturg and Director of New Play Development at the Alley Theatre in Houston, TX. He serves also as Distinguished Professor of Theater at the University of Houston where he teaches Playwriting and Dramaturgy on the faculty with Edward Albee. Prior to this he was the Senior Dramaturg at the Arena Stage and Director of Arena's New Play Development Series. Before joining Arena Stage, Bly served for twelve years as Chair of the Graduate Playwriting Program at the Yale School of Drama and as Associate Artistic Director for the Yale Repertory Theatre.

Bly has dramaturged over 100 productions at major regional theaters and on Broadway. Highlights of his career include dramaturging the premiere of Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* at the Yale Rep and Public Theater, dramaturging the premiere of Moises Kaufman's *33 Variations* at the Arena Stage and on Broadway, and becoming the first Production Dramaturg to be credited on a Broadway production when he worked on *Execution of Justice*, written and directed by Emily Mann in 1986.

He has written for *Dramaturgy in American Theater*, *TheatreForum*, *American Theatre*, and also Yale's *Theater* as Contributing and Advisory Editor. He wrote introductions for and edited Volumes I and II of *The Production Notebooks: Theatre in Process*. He most recently gave a keynote address at the 20/20 Playwright Conference at the University of Birmingham, England. A graduate of the Yale School of Drama, Bly was the Chair of the Board of Directors for Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas from 2001–2005.

In thanking you for honoring me with the Lessing Award, I wanted to share a few thoughts with you tonight... I taught a Dramaturgy Course at the Yale School of Drama for years as many of you are aware. Now I begin my course "Dramaturgy for the 21st Century: The Questioning Spirit" at the University of Houston each year with the following observations about the Dramaturgical Impulse. Over fifteen years ago, the Chauvet Cave paintings in France were discovered revealing a Paleolithic gallery of horses, mammoths, bears, lions, bisons, and rhinos. Perhaps at the Chauvet site approximately 32,000 to 37,000 years ago in a dark cavern next to an Ice Age Leonardo da Vinci or Frieda Kahlo an apprentice, child, or a clan shaman stood holding a flickering torch or a Paleolithic palette and while gazing at the growing wonder on the wall nevertheless dared to ask the artist a question about the color or lines emerging before them. Or perhaps at the Lascaux Cave site some 18,000 years ago another shaman might have asked an even more profound and more vexing series of questions. "Why did you paint that horse upside down? What are those black dots? Stars? Why is that bird beside the man and bison on a shaft?" Perhaps these questions provoked a conversation...or perhaps they were ignored with total silence. But I would like to believe there was someone there who asked the question. I have come to believe that over the past thirty years that at my best I serve that function as a teacher, mentor, or artist; that I ask meaningful, thorny questions that help and challenge other artists. Indeed the act of dramaturgy is not limited to dramaturgs as we all know. Committing an act of dramaturgy at its core (if it is to have any real value or efficacy) is to have a "Questioning Spirit," a phrase I coined well over twenty-five years ago, introducing it into our discourse in a Yale Theatre interview. It keyed off another interview that was done in 1977 with the legendary German director Peter Stein and dramaturg Dieter Sturm in which they talked about questioning being at the core of their work and creative process and the destruction of illusionary knowledge, *scheinwissen*, as a company at the Schaubuhne Theatre.

Over the past 25 years the phrase “Questioning Spirit” and other invaluable phrases have entered our vocabulary, our Dramaturgical Lexicon thanks to prescient inventive wordsmiths such as Geoff Proehl who has also offered us whole universes of dramaturgical paradigms. And, speaking of the “Questioning Spirit,” it was Ibsen who said “To be an artist is to sit in judgment on oneself.” What Ibsen says is what each of us would do well to focus upon rather than to fret about or count how many Google Hits we have logged today. Dramaturgical websites and Virtual Dramaturgy are new, thrilling, even valuable innovations, but let us not confuse technological innovation, marketing chatter, and banter masquerading as dramaturgy of substance and consequence. We must avoid such dramaturgical chatter and banter in our work. It reminds me of what Bertolt Brecht once cautioned: “The modern theatre needs to be questioned...not about whether it manages to interest spectators in buying tickets — e.g. in the theatre itself — but about whether it manages to interest the spectator in the world.” Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (in his legendary eighteen-hour historic meeting with Stanislavsky in 1897), Jan Kott, Kenneth Tynan, Dieter Sturm, Arthur Ballet, Anne Catta-neo, and Michael Lupu all understood something about the “Questioning Spirit” and sitting in judgment on oneself and their respective theatres as true artists.

Recently, I moved to Houston to become Senior Dramaturg and Director of New Play Development at the Alley Theatre, allowing me to continue my work with Herbert Siguenza of Culture Clash and Moises Kaufman of the Tectonic Theatre Company, to begin new relationships with major artists such as Gregory Boyd, Obie Award winners David Cromer and Joshua Schmidt, or to discover new plays and work closely with such exciting emerging playwrights as Rajiv Joseph, Kenneth Lin, or Frances Ya Chu-Cowhig. At the Alley Theatre, it is my privilege to work with one of the few thriving Resident Acting Companies in the country. I am in the rehearsal room constantly where I belong as a dramaturg as an artist and not in an office slouched over a computer. I have also been privileged to continue my second love — that of teaching and mentoring students in Playwriting and Dramaturgy. Last fall, as a Professor at the University of Houston, I taught the “Dramaturgy for the 21st Century: The Questioning Spirit” course for the first time after having taught its equivalent at the Yale School of Drama for twelve years. But at Yale I had taught it to Dramaturgy and Playwriting students exclusively. I discovered that my class at the University of Houston consisted of two Graduate level Dramaturgy students and nearly a dozen graduate Design and Technical students. I found myself discarding and reconfiguring what had been my Dramaturgy course at Yale. My “Best of Bly” Yale syllabus changed. In doing so, the whole notion of the “Dramaturgical Impulse” began to transform for me, began to deepen and broaden to other disciplines far beyond that of the dramaturg’s domain.

Mid-way through the course, during a class dedicated to the investigation of the “Questioning Spirit” and the “Generative Creative Process,” I would typically discuss the French playwright, critic Helene Cixous’s revelatory essay “The Last Portrait of God,” in which she writes about, among other artistic concerns, Rembrandt and his life-long obsession with self-portraiture and why he painted one hundred portraits of himself. Now in Houston I decided to enhance the experience for the design students and others by sharing

with the class a DVD excerpt from Simon Schama’s hour-long episode on Rembrandt from the BBC Series *The Power of Art*. But in reviewing the DVD prior to class, I discovered to my surprise a key phrase in the episode that I had missed in my first viewing of it that I found shockingly germane to the whole notion of the “Dramaturgical Impulse” and the “Questioning Spirit” as we know it.

Schama, in revisiting Rembrandt, presented Rembrandt toward the end of his life as a rebel out of step with the emerging, vain, Peacock Generation of the Merchant Textile Class of Amsterdam. Here was the Rembrandt who looked beyond the pose, beyond the societal mask, telling us something about our humanity. Schama shares with us how a penniless Rembrandt was commissioned by the pompous Burgomeisters to paint for the new Town Hall in Amsterdam a stirring depiction of how the Dutch Nation was born. What the Establishment wanted was a civilized decorous representation, “pictorially well-behaved” of the Ancient Dutch — The Batavian Rebellion against the Romans — and the famous, iconographic “Rebels Oath Moment.”

What they got instead from Rembrandt was not refined gentlemen rebels but ugliness: misshapen, rough rebel barbarians, paint slugged on, paint caked on a painting “drunk on its own wildness,” according to Schama. So, down came Rembrandt’s painting from the Town Hall wall. And, the nearly indigent, penniless Rembrandt was forced to chop up his masterpiece, hoping someone would buy it piecemeal, even a fragment. But no one cared...

Schama shares that Rembrandt’s “The Conspiracy of the Batavians Under Claudius Civilus” was “the greatest triumph of his visual imagination,” but it was also the ruin of Rembrandt’s greatest vision of humanity, and “his most shocking disaster.” Sadly, all we have left are a few scraps of it. He goes on to describe what Rembrandt accomplished when he says at the end of the BBC episode, as if both he and Rembrandt in one voice are speaking to us and the assembled citizens of Amsterdam who rejected it:

“And you’re thinking it looks unfinished. Aggressively rough. A work in progress....This is my group portrait of all of you. A portrait of a people. A portrait of who you are. Of who you’ve always been...Let the high and mighty celebrate their greatness with fastidious etiquette. Let them even copy the rest of Europe if they must. But Rembrandt the bankrupt, the “has been,” was their patriotic conscience... Everything you think matters doesn’t... So of course, Rembrandt is not going to paint by the rule book. Instead, he does the roughest, and toughest history painting ever. An old lion’s roar of a picture. He had every incentive to paint it straight but something in him just wouldn’t do it. This is what drives the greatest art: contempt for ingratiation. Giving them what they wanted was beside the point. Giving them what they needed was more like it. But they refused to look and that’s why he cut up his masterpiece.”

In closing, all great artists have a “Questioning Spirit.” They look behind the mask. They look behind the pose. And that is our task as artists.

But you ask what was the “key phrase” I encountered in that Simon Schama BBC episode on Rembrandt that I felt was a revelation that built upon my working mantra for the profession, the “Questioning Spirit” from twenty-five years ago? At the height of the discussion,



Schama describes Rembrandt the artist, the man, as having “The Eyes of a Man Who Never Stops Looking.” If we are to be Dramaturgs of Consequence, Teachers and Mentors who have a Lasting Impact, we must acquire such eyes if we do not already have them, develop such eyes, exercise constantly and rigorously such eyes, women and men’s eyes that never stop looking.

Thank you to those women and men who are here tonight who have eyes that never stop looking for honoring me — and in doing so have reawakened and galvanized my Dramaturgical Spirit. And because of that, this Award, this night, this speech, is not a coda to a career but a new-found beginning. Thank you all for reigniting that spark in me....

Mark Bly  
June, 2010  
Banff, Canada

*I am grateful to those who have inspired me with their thinking over the years: Geoffrey Proehl, Michael Lupu, DD Kugler, Liz Engelman, Brian Quirt, Jan Kott, Anne Cattaneo, Pamela K. Anderson, and, most especially on this speech, Cat Witschey.*



Mark Bly, delivering his acceptance speech upon receiving the Lessing Award.

Photo: Cindy SoRelle

# SHIFTING BOUNDARIES

## Perspectives from African American Dramaturgs

### An Introduction

### By Sydné Mahone

SYDNÉ MAHONE is associate professor of playwriting at University of Iowa. She also teaches quarter-time in the African American Studies Program. She is the editor of *Moon Marked and Touched By Sun: Plays By African American Women* (TCG, 1994); and *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together* (William Morrow, 1998). Recent affiliations include the Sundance Institute Theatre Lab in Utah and *Going to the River*, a festival of black women writers at Ensemble Studio Theatre in New York. She was the director of play development at Crossroads Theatre Company from 1985–1997 where she served as production dramaturg for many new plays including works by Rita Dove, August Wilson, Ntozake Shange, George C. Wolfe, Leslie Lee, Aishah Rahman, Don Evans, Pearl Cleage, Richard Wesley, and Dominic Taylor. Special projects at Crossroads: staff producer of the annual Genesis Festival of New Voices, a celebration of cutting-edge, alternative styles in African American drama; and founder of Sangoma, the Women's Company. Research awards include scholar-in-residence at the Getty Research Institute and guest dramaturg sponsored by the Pew/TCG National Theatre Artist Residency Program, hosted by Brown University's Rites and Reason Theatre. She has been a panelist for many playwriting awards including the NEA, Rockefeller Foundation, and TCG. She has taught at Dartmouth College, New York University-Tisch School of the Arts, and the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. She is a member of the board of directors for Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA)

This special edition of *Review* is the first collection of essays devoted to African American dramaturgy and to the selected production-dramaturgs of color currently at work in mainstream American theaters. I am honored to introduce the contributors, Debra Cardona, Faedra Carpenter, and Otis Ramsey-Zöe, whose articles were developed from papers first presented at the 2009 Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA) conference panel, "Shifting Boundaries: Perspectives from African American Dramaturgs."<sup>1</sup>

In addition to documenting the original event, this edition marks the culmination of my search for a productive way to include dramaturgs of color in the process of shaping a national agenda for LMDA. As a member of the LMDA Board of Directors, I was informed and inspired by the work of my board colleague, Debra Cardona, who, in the previous year, had activated the professional network to identify and compile a list of more than forty dramaturgs of color, many of whom had yet to join LMDA. First and foremost, I was simply curious to know: What are they thinking about? What is the view from the desks of these "dramaturgs at work" today? And what are they working on? I offered to moderate a panel discussion and Debra agreed to participate. In preparation for this occasion, the 24th annual LMDA conference in Washington, DC, from 16 – 19 July 2009, the question quickly emerged: why interject the subject of race into this particular collective meditation? Given the larger theme of the conference, "Dramaturgy: Out of Bounds," I also had to ask, Is the topic of race in bounds or out of bounds in our discussion of contemporary theatre? Seeking to disentangle the knotted subtexts of the question, I sought input from my colleague, Faedra Carpenter, who agreed to join me in convening a panel, and who recommended Otis Ramsey-Zöe as the respondent. Our intentions were to situate the event as a mechanism for adding dimension to the exploration of dramaturgy and cultural practice, and to prompt a new discussion that would bring depth and light to the national conversation on race.

Clearly, this event was an "inside job"—the work of two board members and our friends. However, the fact that a panel on Black dramaturgy had never occurred before at a LMDA conference suggests that, on some level, we were also "outsiders" as people of

color.<sup>2</sup> This publication, then, further suggests that LMDA, a predominantly White organization, is a model of conscious change, one that acts on the values of inclusion. This duality illustrates, in part, I believe, the existential struggle of the dramaturg in production. So often, the measure of our efficacy is a direct correlation of our ability to move across the ever-shifting boundaries — be they self-defined or externally imposed — of the insider / outsider roles we play. Among the many insights and tales of dramaturgical heroism offered in these essays, their embedded instruction on this complex area of our practice is an unexpected gift of the collection. The dramaturg's sphere of influence is most sharply defined by the ability to ask the right question at the right time, and some of the most productive questions are the questions we ask of ourselves: How am I using my influence? Which factors are affecting my decision to question or not to question? As an insider, one can decide to maintain the "illusion of safety" and privilege, thus enshrining *what is*, or one can decide to facilitate change, to expand *what is possible*.<sup>3</sup> Though perhaps equally valid (or justifiable, based on the given circumstances), each choice bears distinct consequences. The ability to see the world and the work from multiple vantage points — perhaps from beyond the binary construct of the insider / outsider — may be the ultimate measure of one's potential for expanding, or otherwise dramatically altering, the landscape of the American theatre.

As editor of this issue, I invite the contributors to consider these questions as prompts to dialogue and discovery:

*How do we begin to map the current dramaturgical landscape for African American theatre? Where are the sites of innovation? As playwrights and dramaturgs move into the mainstream theatres and academies, while directors and producers remain on the fringe, how does it affect the discussion of Black aesthetics? How do these dynamics alter the cultural agenda for African American theatre in the 21st century? How can dramaturgs elevate the national discussion on race?*

This purposefully broad range of inquiry is set within the context of the conference theme, "Dramaturgy: Out of Bounds," a provocative idea that recognizes the practice of dramaturgy in many spaces beyond the formal theatre, thus spawning a host of new panel topics such as "Dramaturging the Museum," "Theatre Space and Urban Renewal," and "Rewriting National Mythologies: New Plays in the Nation's Capitol." The keynote speech by Joe Palka of National Public Radio's weekly program, "Science Fridays," addressed the challenges of condensing complex scientific discoveries into "short dramas of discoveries" that inform and entertain a general public-radio-listening audience. Similarly, the panel on African American dramaturgy addressed some of the complexities of reading race at this moment in American theatre by getting beneath the surface rhetoric, which too often inhibits rather than fosters deeper conversation. At the very least, these perspectives on dramaturgy offer new angles of vision on the dramaturg's role in the rehearsal room, in the realm of dramatic criticism, and in society.

As history would frame it, the seismic shifts in American politics place our discussion in the center of the larger historical and social context shaped by the election of Barack Obama as the first Black president of the United States of America. His story magnifies the essential tension of the insider / outsider identity, which when played

out upon the epic stage of history, clearly reveals this facet of identity as both a source of vulnerability and a source of power.

Among the many political headlines that filtered into our conversation, I recall that two days before we convened the panel in the nation's capitol, President Obama delivered the keynote address to the 100th annual national meeting of the NAACP in New York City. As "theatre folk," we took special pride in learning that our President was a theatre patron, when, in the month of May, he and the first lady, Michelle, kept their "date night" with a presidential visit to the Belasco Theatre to attend a performance of August Wilson's play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, produced by Lincoln Center. It was the first Broadway revival of the play since the playwright's untimely death in 2007. Notably, this production, directed by Bartlett Sher, marked the first time a White director secured the rights to direct a play by Wilson on Broadway.

These instances represent a few of the many shifting boundaries that define our cultural moment, and thus provide dynamic points of reference. As a nation, and particularly as an industry, we are grappling with the dramatic shift in racial politics at the same time that we wrestle with the effects of the economic disaster that began on Wall Street and rumbled across the globe. Within this context of tremendous social change, we took the space and time to enter, and moreover, to facilitate the conversation on race in American theatre.

These articles continue and extend the conversation begun at that conference, presenting a variety of strategies for navigating the uncharted territory of shifting racial realities in American theatre. They treat variations on the circumstances that demand new vocabularies and strategies for expanding consciousness in theatre practice, and they call for enhanced, dynamic dialogue among collaborators working across cultural lines.

In "Classics in a New Light: Dramaturgy at The Classical Theatre of Harlem," resident dramaturg Debra Cardona, discusses the vibrant artistic possibilities derived from various approaches to the classics even as she questions, "What plays should be considered part of 'the canon'?" Her treatment of issues relating to advocacy for Black classics and to the challenges of Black actors performing European classics, reveals the contradictions, if not double standards, that hover over the cross-cultural treatment of classic plays. She illustrates her interrogation of assumptions with reflections on CTH productions of *The Cherry Orchard*, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, and *Waiting for Godot* set in post-Katrina New Orleans. Cardona sheds light on the necessity of courage in the dramaturg's work to facilitate difficult conversations, to support risk-taking, and thereby, to influence change through the collaboration.

Faedra Carpenter's essay, "The Innovation of Inclusion: Dramaturgy in the Mythos of a 'Post-Racial Era,'" holds within its title the acknowledgment of racial progress along with the call for increased commitment to the advancement of its ideals. Opening with anecdotal evidence from her experience as a director of *Cloud Tectonics* by Jose Rivera, Carpenter introduces a powerful trope that resonates throughout her commentary: the notion of "presence and absence" as a lens through which we can view and map the cultural landscape, both in the collaborative process and in the final products that appear on stage. In response to her observation that theatre companies are "increasingly embracing the tendency to produce African American

plays without African American artistic leadership at the helm,” she calls for change that permits an “expansion rather than a contraction of perspectives.” Carpenter examines the dramaturg’s role in facilitating conversations that affect not only the integrity of racial representation on stage, but also the content of the canon. The adaptation of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Polk County* and her production dramaturgy on Lynn Nottage’s *Fabulation* at Baltimore’s Center Stage provide rich evidence for her argument. As director, scholar, and practitioner, Carpenter offers three distinct points of view from which to discuss the intricacies of the dramaturg’s responsibility for negotiating the challenges of inter- and intra-cultural dialogue. Finally, she adds a new task to the agenda for our field when she identifies the need for “de-segregating dramaturgy.”

Otis Ramsey-Zöe responds with “Back to Black: A Response to Contemplations on the Dramaturgical Landscape for African American Theatre (in a Time of Obama).” This final essay focuses on the language we use to discuss race. He presses for definitions and points to the conflicts between self-definitions and imposed definitions, in this case, of Blackness. Insisting on clarity and precision in communication, Ramsey-Zöe asks, What is “black art?” And what is the meaning of “post-racial”? He challenges the “current post-racial fantasy” and asks us to consider the consequences of this linguistic tendency to oversimplify reality. He positions the term as a flawed revision of the precursor, “post-black,” a term coined in the world of visual arts during the 1990s, and echoes Carpenter in his caution: “this rush toward universality runs the risk of reducing or even eliminating racial presence.” Finally, he, too, champions the dramaturg’s role in initiating many kinds of conversations — with self, between collaborators, between cultures, between texts, and between epochs.

Singly and collectively, these essays reflect the evolving tradition of Black theatre and its dynamic impact on the practice of dramaturgy. They also serve as catalysts for conversation as they articulate new narratives of cultural interrogation, exerting critical force, and identifying the deeper contours of responsibility in the dramaturg’s line of duty.

As we open this new chapter in dramaturgical letters, I recognize the value of the modest things that we do in our personal spheres that can impact the public sphere in ways both large and small. If we each take one step to break through a boundary that no longer protects us, but merely sustains an illusion of safety, we begin to shift the boundaries that limit imagination. We shift the boundary, even as we may observe, interrogate or report on the shift. I look forward to the work that is yet to come from the dramaturgs who accept the invitation to build upon this foundation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgments: On behalf of all the authors, I am deeply grateful to D.J. Hopkins, editor of *Review*, who invited us to contribute to this special edition. I also thank the associate editors, Sydney Cheek O’Donnell and Lauren Beck, whose attention to detail enhanced the work. Lastly, I thank the contributors, Debra, Faedra, and Otis, for their liberating insights and sustained commitment to their work.

<sup>2</sup> On the capitalization of the word “Black”: In full awareness of the demands of academic publishing, which include adherence to the

rule of consistency in usage of language and style, I insist on capitalizing the term “Black” in reference to people of African descent still engaged in the struggle for freedom, justice, and equality in the United States of America and throughout the African diaspora. In some cases, my use of “Black” is synonymous with “African American”; the distinction between the two references is perhaps a political one that connotes respect for the sacrifices of my ancestors and pride in the cultural traditions, the legacy, which sustains me as a Black woman. To be fair, I also capitalize “White” in reference to people of European descent in North America. In the interest of freedom of expression, and perhaps at the cost of consistency, I do not impose my stylistic preferences on others; I accept their usage of the lower case “b” in accord with their preferences.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase “illusion of safety” is coined by James Baldwin. Variations on this theme exist in several essays, e.g. in reference to his critique of Richard Wright in “Many Thousands Gone”; and in reference to artists in a 1961 Studs Terkel interview in *Conversations With James Baldwin*: “the nature of society is to create, among its citizens, an illusion of safety; but it is also absolutely true that the safety is always necessarily an illusion. Artists are here to disturb the peace” (21). I refer, in part, to the following excerpt from “Notes for a Hypothetical Novel”:

There is an illusion about America, a myth about America to which we are clinging which has nothing to do with the lives we lead [...]. This collision between one’s image of oneself and what one actually is is always very painful, and there are two things you can do about it, you can meet the collision head-on and try and become what you really are or you can retreat and try to remain what you thought you were, which is a fantasy, in which you will certainly perish. (153)

## Works Cited

- Baldwin, James. “Notes for a Hypothetical Novel.” *Nobody Knows My Name*. New York: Dial Press, 1961, 141–54.
- Terkel, Studs. “An Interview with James Baldwin.” *Conversations With James Baldwin*. Ed. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt. University Press of Mississippi, 1989, 3–23.



# CLASSICS IN A NEW LIGHT

## Dramaturgy at the Classical Theatre of Harlem

**By Debra Cardona**

DEBRA CARDONA is a dramaturg and actor. She received her BFA in Drama at New York University and her MFA in Dramaturgy from Brooklyn College. She has been Resident Dramaturg at The Classical Theatre of Harlem (CTH) since 2003 and has also 'turged at Women's Project, The New Harmony Project, P.S. 122 and the Kennedy Center. Debra is on the Board of Directors of the LMDA and is currently a cast member in the *Mary Poppins* national tour.

In July 2009, Sydne Mahone, associate professor of Theatre Arts at the University of Iowa, moderated a panel discussion on perspectives from African American dramaturgs at the LMDA conference. She posed these questions, enough for hours of discourse:

How do we begin to map the current dramaturgical landscape for African American theatre? Where are the sites of innovation? As playwrights and dramaturgs move into the mainstream theatres and academies, while directors and producers remain on the fringe, how does it affect the discussion of Black aesthetics? How do these dynamics alter the cultural agenda for African American theatre in the 21st century? How can dramaturgs elevate the national discussion on race?

As production dramaturg with The Classical Theatre of Harlem (CTH), and as panelist in a discussion of such a potentially large scope, how should I address these questions? Should the dialogue cover the broad spectrum? Could it — or should it — speak for the entire community of artists of color? Or could I somehow do justice to the magnitude of the conversation by focusing solely on my few years' experience from 2003–2010 with the small, Harlem-based theater company that has served as my theatrical home?

In what ways does Classical Theatre of Harlem map the current dramaturgical landscape for African American theater, establish moments of innovation, and affect the discussion of Black aesthetics as well as the national discussion of race? I believe such work is done by taking a look at its mission as a theater devoted to the classics, and by defining, or perhaps more to the point, *redefining*, what they are.

CTH made its start as a Shakespeare Workshop at the Harlem School of the Arts (HSA) and later grew into a production company, offering opportunities to artists of color in the professional New York City theater community as well as to HSA students. We perform and adapt the classics, not only those plays by “dead White men,” but also those of Black playwrights, including those from the African diaspora as well as African American playwrights. What plays should be considered part of “the canon”? While working at CTH, I have seen



the canon shifted, adjusted, to create room for West Indian playwright and Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, as well as Americans Adrienne Kennedy, Melvin Van Peebles, August Wilson, Paul Carter Harrison, Douglas Turner Ward, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes. It's only a beginning.

In regard to the question of mapping the current dramaturgical landscape, I would rather ask, "How can we expand that landscape for African American theater?" We do so not only by making — no, *demanding* — a place for great writers of color, but also by expanding the places for actors and directors of color to present the whole of the canon. Is that starting to happen? Actually, yes, but it is slow going, using cautious steps. And, I admit, there is a freedom in being part of a Harlem-based company, where it is automatically assumed that its productions will be created around an acting pool of mainly black artists. The discussion of race and the Black aesthetic is automatically inherent, even when it is not deliberate.

Innovation happens in the stories we choose to tell, and the first conversation must always be about how we see fit to tell them. At CTH, selecting plays by Adrienne Kennedy and Melvin Van Peebles is self-evident. The big question is: how will we approach *The Cherry Orchard* or *Waiting for Godot*? Do we present such works traditionally, or do we change the circumstances of each play to resonate with our times, or with the Harlem community?

The decision was made to present *The Cherry Orchard* in a traditional manner, set in 1904 Russia, as it was written. However, whenever I would mention to friends that I was working on the play, certain questions would inevitably arise: "Oh, you're doing it at Classical Theatre of Harlem? Where are you setting it? What are you calling it?" My answer would always be: "We're setting it in Russia and we're calling it *The Cherry Orchard*." And for some reason, that answer would be met with confused looks. It seemed to me that what

was expected from CTH was a more "Black" production (for lack of a better word), and that perhaps we were making a statement by doing this play "straight," whether we intended to or not. Did we *have* to set the play in America for it to be acceptable with a predominantly black cast? None of us on the creative team thought so. The belief that Chekhov's play needed to be re-situated in order to be performed in Harlem brings to mind a review Noel Coward wrote about Josh Logan's *The Wisteria Trees*, an Americanization of *The Cherry Orchard* set in 1905 Louisiana. In his review, Coward dubbed the play "A Month in the Wrong Country" (Gilman 202).

With our production of *Three Sisters*, the discussion of approach came up again — this time from members of the acting company. During table work, some of the biggest questions posed by the cast were: Why would CTH be doing this play now and how would the production be presented? Would it be beneficial to give it a straight approach or should it be changed? Shouldn't this production present the Prozorov family as part of the "Talented Tenth" — that is, W.E.B. DuBois's phrase to describe the one in ten African Americans who he believed would become the leaders of their race through the pursuit of higher education, writing books, and creating social change — and be set in the Harlem Renaissance? And, indeed, as a performance approach, having the Prozorovs represent DuBois's Talented Tenth certainly resonates in Vershinin's repeated theme to the sisters: after the three are gone, there will be perhaps six like them, then twelve, until people like them become the majority. Yet, during the course of the play, it becomes clear that this will not happen — Masha no longer plays the piano, Irina forgets the Italian word for "window," Olga becomes a frustrated headmistress; and Andre abandons his dream of becoming a professor at Moscow University — the pride of Russia — settling instead for a life as a petty town official. The family's talents become, as Masha says, like "an unnecessary appendage," "a sixth finger."



The CTH production of *The Cherry Orchard*, featuring: (left to right) Roslyn Ruff, Charles Turner, George Hosmer, Wendell Pierce, Petronia Paley, Earle Hyman. Photo: Jill Jones.

Why does having a theater of color meet with such resistance when it chooses a "traditional" approach to Chekhov — that is, specifically set in 1901, in Russia, with the actors playing Russians — but meets with no such resistance for "traditional" productions of Shakespeare or the Greeks? So, would a "straight" production of Chekhov best benefit CTH's audience? Should we give a more African American commentary to Chekhov's play? It was veteran actor Earle Hyman who convinced everyone at the table of the beauty of an African American theater company doing Chekhov as it was intended by the author without the need for any change. It should be noted that Earle, known by the American public as Grandpa Huxtable from *The Cosby Show*, is considered in Norway to be one of the leading interpreters of Ibsen in Norwegian, and his last role on Broadway was as Halvard Solness, *The Master Builder*. One of my favorite memories of Earle was at a talkback for *Three Sisters*. A group of theater students from Norway had attended and one of them asked him a question. He answered in fluent Norwegian. Every jaw in

the theater dropped — including my own and those of the entire *Three Sisters* cast.

In the case of *Waiting for Godot*, however, we took a post-Katrina approach. Director Chris McElroen's inspiration for the production was a photo of a man floating in the New Orleans floodwaters on a wooden door, so he decided to place Didi and Gogo on a roof in a flood. With the blessings of the Beckett estate, which is famously dogged in its insistence that the playwright's work always be performed specifically as written, a thirty-foot-long above-ground pool was bought, a roof was built inside it, and then the pool was filled with water. The new circumstances of Beckett's play made his words resound more strongly for our audience. In Act One, Gogo picked up a piece of chalk and wrote "GODOT" on the roof, just as the victims of Hurricane Katrina wrote messages on their roofs as they waited for days to be saved. Pozzo made his entrance in a rubber raft pulled by Lucky. When the blind Pozzo fell into the water during Act Two, he was actually drowning while Didi and Gogo took their time contemplating whether or not they should help him. The approach was so resonant that CTH got funding to remount the production in New Orleans.

In New Orleans, it was decided that the pool would not be needed, and the show was designed in a style that was closer to Beckett's original set — but this time, it was performed on a street in the destroyed lower Ninth Ward, a spot described as a once-bustling corner now marked only by "knee high weeds and crooked streetlamps" (Brown). Two free performances were scheduled and bleachers were provided to seat about 600 people. The word, however, got out about the production and both nights over 1000 people showed up. Not everyone that came knew they were going to see a Beckett play. They had only heard that there was a show "about the Ninth Ward" being performed and they wanted to see it. A third show was added. An article in the UK-based *Guardian* noted: "So many lines reverberated with post-Katrina meaning — 'where are all these corpses from?'; 'there's no lack of void'; 'things have changed here since yesterday'; 'do you not recognise the place? Recognise? What is there to recognise!' — that the audience darkly chuckled throughout the entire show" (Brown). Beckett's words pronounced in this setting made the play seem as if it had been written just for New Orleans.

In Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, director Alfred Preisser had to address an aspect of black culture that was not specifically African American, but that was concerned with the effects of colonialism. It is the story of a poor charcoal burner named Makak, meaning Monkey — a man full so of self-loathing that he cannot look into a mirror because he thinks himself so ugly; he lives alone on a mountain and comes down solely to sell his charcoal and get drunk on the proceeds. During the course of a drunken night in jail, Makak sees an Apparition, a white woman, who tells him he is not a Monkey, but a Lion and an African king; he goes on a quest to return to Africa and claim his kingdom, and in turn, embrace his Blackness. Once crowned king, Makak is forced by an angry mob to reject the



The CTH production of *Three Sisters*, featuring: (front row) Sabrina LeBeauf (Olga), Carmen Gill (Irina), and Amanda Mason Warren (Masha). (back row) Philip Christian (Solyony) and Josh Tyson (Tuzenbach). Photo: Troy Hourie.

colonial world, which he condemns to death, and to behold the White Apparition — the source of his vision, but also of his self-hatred. This final act frees him from the bitterness of his obsessions, and he awakens from his dream no longer thinking of himself as an animal, but as a man. Released from jail, he returns to his hut on the mountain with a new sense of self-acceptance and identity. With its indictment of colonial society, history, and law, the play could easily be interpreted as anti-white, but that was not Walcott's intention, for Walcott himself said: "Maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor" (Muse 370).

*Dream on Monkey Mountain* is a play that crosses cultures. Just as the entire creative team had to learn much about Russian culture in the Chekhov plays, we immersed ourselves in the culture of St. Lucia and Trinidad — the former being Walcott's birthplace and the latter where *Dream on Monkey Mountain* was originally produced. It is a play with music and traditional dances, but there is no score available, so I spent several months tracking down recordings of the calypsos cited in the play as well as hunting down video recordings of West Indian dances. We had a dialect coach, and I provided a patois dictionary for the cast. Luckily for us, one of our cast members was from St. Lucia. In an early rehearsal, we asked her to tell stories from her childhood, including some animal stories passed down by the storytellers in her town. If any specific questions came up she was always ready to help, and she gently corrected us if we "got it wrong."

A couple of episodes in Walcott's play presented us with potentially sticky situations. The most problematic: how were we going to portray the Apparition — a white woman — and then have a black man kill her onstage? In the Negro Ensemble Company's production in the early 1970s, the crowd applauded when the Apparition was beheaded. But how does such an action reverberate in the 21st century, and was that the reaction that author Walcott intended? The





J. Kyle Manzay and Wendell Pierce in the CTH production of *Waiting for Godot*. Photo: Jill Jones.

director — CTH artistic director Alfred Preisser — and I were able to watch a video and read reviews of Bill T. Jones’s production at The Guthrie Theater. Jones portrayed the Apparition as a shaft of light, feeling — after consulting Maya Angelou about the play — that the ritual sacrifice of a white woman on stage was a cliché. Again resisting cliché, at the end of the play, as Makak returned to his mountain, Jones replaced him with a group of young black men with boom boxes, exploding as one Denver critic called it, “the potential sentimentality” of the play. So how was CTH going to han-

dle these important moments? Director Preisser did not want to use a white woman either, feeling the same way as Jones. In the course of my research I had discovered that Walcott was extremely influenced by Kabuki theater at the time he was writing *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, and that he felt that the beheading of the Apparition (described to be “like the moon walking along her own road” in his play) was necessary because, “Getting rid of his overwhelming awe of everything white is the first step every colonial must take. The error is that when you translate this into *political* terms it leads — wrongly, disastrously — into acts of murder and eventually genocide” (King 249). Walcott has said that the crisis in the play was a spiritual one, rather than political. He described it as “the search for self respect and pride” (Baer 38). With this in mind and in keeping with the incorporation of Kabuki into his production concept, Preisser decided to make the character of the Apparition more figurative than literal and hired Délé, a breathtaking dark-skinned black woman who moved like a dancer, draped her in white

and powdered her moon-shaped face a ghostly white. At the point of actual beheading, there was a blackout. When the lights came back up, Makak was found back in his cell. The ending was performed as written, with no addition or modern-day commentary on what came before, allowing the play the possibility of its sentimentality.

During the course of the run, Derek Walcott visited a number of times, which was exhilarating and a little frightening. When we were introduced, he commented on how far the production had come along since he first saw it the week before. I told him how much I enjoyed working on the play and ventured to ask, “So, how did we do?” A warm smile formed on his lips and his eyes glowed. He then said, “You did very well.”



From the CTH production of *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, featuring Andre De Shields as Makak. Photo: Jill Jones.

So, how does a theater company map the current dramaturgical landscape for African American theater, establish moments of innovation, and affect the discussion of the Black aesthetic as well as the discussion of race? Most certainly, the casts and creative teams at Classical Theatre of Harlem explore the issues raised by these questions in every project undertaken; the exploration is carried on in the work that is produced, and it is reflected in the content of what we, as theater artists, choose to put on stage (such as redefining what is considered “a classic”), as well as the form, or how we choose to put our stories on stage. Whether we take a traditional approach or a risky one that shakes up what audiences have come to take for granted, we show classics in a new light. We have the ability to influence — and be influenced — by initiating tough conversations that permit us to

confront our fears and move beyond them to the place where we are not afraid to examine the many possibilities of such questions. I believe it is one of the most crucial and exciting parts of what we, as dramaturgs, do.

### Works Cited

- Baer, William, ed. *Conversations with Derek Walcott*. University Press of Mississippi, 1996.
- Brown, Ethan. "The Lower Ninth Ward Meets Samuel Becket." *The Guardian* 12 November 2007. 23 Nov 2007 <www.guardian.co.uk>.
- Gilman, Richard. *Chekhov's Plays: An Opening into Eternity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.
- King, Bruce. *Derek Walcott and West Indian Drama: Not Only a Playwright but a Company, The Trinidad Theatre Workshop 1959–1993*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.
- Walcott, Derek. *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970.
- Walcott, Derek. "The Muse of History." *A Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffen. London: Routledge, 1995, 370–4.



The CTH production of *Waiting for Godot*, featuring: Wendell Pierce (Vladimir), J. Kyle Manzay (Estragon), Chris McKinney (Pozzo), and Billy Eugene Jones (Lucky).

Photo: Jill Jones.

# THE INNOVATION OF INCLUSION

## Dramaturgy in the Mythos of a “Post-Racial Era”

**By Faedra Chatard Carpenter**

FAEDRA CHATARD CARPENTER is a freelance dramaturg and an assistant professor of theatre at the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. As a former resident dramaturg for Arena Stage and Crossroads Theatre Company, Carpenter has also worked as a freelance dramaturg for The Kennedy Center, Centerstage, The African Continuum Theatre Company, The Black Women Playwrights Group, and TheatreWorks. Her interests include the study of race, sexuality, and gender in contemporary performance, and she has published work in *Theatre Topics*, *Women & Performance*, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, and *Callaloo*.

“How can you see an absence when you don’t know there is a presence?”<sup>1</sup>

Cherríe Moraga’s well-intended, probing words landed on me — and they landed hard.

The celebrated playwright, poet, activist, and teacher had just witnessed my production of José Rivera’s *Cloud Tectonics* at Stanford University. I was a graduate student at the time, with the doubly good fortune of being enrolled in Cherríe Moraga’s playwriting course and having the esteemed artist serve as a member of my dissertation committee. So, it was in Cherríe’s role as a supportive faculty member that she came to see my main stage directorial debut. But before I proceed further, let me fill in some additional information: As you may know, *Cloud Tectonics* — a play written by a Puerto Rican playwright — features three Puerto Rican characters. I am not Puerto Rican. I am African American. And my dramaturg wasn’t Puerto Rican, but rather a white, American Jew. *And* my actors weren’t Puerto Rican, either: the character of Aníbal was played by a dark, curly-haired Jewish student; the character of Celestina was played by a bi-racial (black/white) woman; and the character of Nelson was portrayed by a self-described “plain old white boy.”

The casting was far from ideal, yes, but at the time I thought little of it. First of all, there weren’t any Latino students in the Drama Department, and I had made an effort to recruit Latino students on campus — I posted audition announcements in the halls of the Casa Zapata dorm and even sent a notice on the Chicano Student Association listserv. With that, I felt that I had done my best — my conscience was clear. So when I saw Cherríe in the audience that night, I was thrilled and eager to hear her thoughts on the show — and she was eager to share them with me. After commending me for choosing to direct *Cloud Tectonics* and offering flattering observations regarding the play’s staging, Cherríe asked me the question that has remained central to my artistic perspective for the past nine years: “How can you see an absence when you don’t know there is a presence?”



She was pointing out, of course, the obvious: the fact that I was championing a Puerto Rican playwright and his Puerto Rican characters, yet I had failed to bring the piece alive with the aid and insight of Latino artists. Now, as a woman-of-color I could certainly offer a personal, complementary perspective to the work. I could use my own experiential lens to help the actors understand the play's thematic exploration of cultural hybridity and assimilation, for example, but I still wasn't equipped to speak knowingly of a Latino experience. And while each member of the creative team could offer a "minoritized" perspective (even the "plain old white boy" who, in this instance, was the minority!), our combined wealth of experience — in tandem with the dramaturg's binder-splitting notebook of articles, essays, and visual material — could never tap into the nuances and subtle expressions of *latinidad*.

Upon first hearing Cherríe's comment / critique, I immediately assumed that she was saying that if I could not secure Latina/o artists, then I simply should not have directed the piece.<sup>2</sup> After talking with her further, however, I realized that was *not* her position, but, rather, she was urging me to understand the significance of my action — and inaction. In asking me, essentially, "How do you know what you might be missing if you don't know what you are missing in the first place?," she was encouraging me to recognize the potential gain to be found in an adjustment of my own nascent thinking. When I tried to explain, for example, the unfortunate dearth of Latino actors on campus, she rightly questioned how hard I had tried to spread the word. Do a few flyers and an e-mail suffice as a true, determined endeavor? Could I have been more assertive in my recruitment efforts? If I was truly dedicated to encouraging those who have been historically underrepresented in our department — or, more broadly conceived for our purposes here, our *field* — does that goal not demand more work? And if I had done the greater deed and multiplied my efforts to no avail, could I still have done more in terms of guiding my undergraduate dramaturg? While the dramaturg's research was valued and valuable, did I ever encourage him to go beyond the books and JSTOR articles to seek counsel, insight, or perspective from a community leader, educator, or cultural curator? Was there ever an attempt to identify someone who might have been able to help us flesh out the scripted (and unscripted) details that honor the play's ethnic specificity?

I share this personal reflection because it is from this incident that I draw the central query of this paper: "How can you see an absence when you don't know there is a presence?" In recalling Cherríe's question, I am applying the lessons I learned and questioning the practice of theatre companies producing work by African American dramatists, sans the contributions of an African American director or dramaturg. While I do not wish to protest, Wilson-style, that all productions by African American playwrights *need* a black director or dramaturg, I would argue that if a non-black director is chosen, then theatre companies should try to secure an African American dramaturg.<sup>3</sup> I am speaking from the perception that theatre companies are increasingly embracing the tendency to produce African American plays without African American artistic leadership at the helm. I am thinking about how this tendency may be tied to a utopian longing to actualize a "post-racial" initiative — a seemingly idyllic and laudable sentiment — without a true reckoning and understanding of how the popularized post-racial narrative can mute that which should

still be heard and recognized. One of the most frequently deployed post-racial sentiments since President Obama's election is, "We elected a black president — there is no more racism!" Rather than bringing us to an era of enlightenment, declarations of this ilk are naïve at best, and at worst, are neo-conservative white-washings of still-pervasive, material inequities. While this is alarming enough, no less insidious are the post-racial sentiments that inevitably dismiss the acknowledgment of our rich cultural particularities in an attempt to promote a banal sameness.

Thus, returning to my earlier assertion, instead of suggesting that black plays should only be directed by black people, I am encouraging us to aspire toward the innovation of inclusion — arguing for an expansion rather than a contraction of perspective. I believe a production's ensemble can benefit greatly from a balance in cultural and experiential lenses. Further, I believe that a black playwright (and, therefore, the play / production) can benefit greatly from *not* being the only "black voice" in the room — and I'd like to stress as well as clarify this. I am not addressing the matter of the playwright's *artistic* vision. The world of the play and the impulses that activate it are the playwright's possession and the playwright's alone. I believe that the dramatist, as the pioneering creator of a piece, should have the definitive and final word on textual matters. However, what I am trying to parse is the benefit of having a dramaturgical figure that can offer supportive cultural insight—insight that is not only informed by her or his unique identity politics, but is also measured and enhanced by the required research and investigative inquiries that are the responsibility of any production or play-development dramaturg.<sup>4</sup>

The fact of the matter is that the African American experience is a matter of *collective* experiences. There is no monolithic black perspective, but rather myriad viewpoints that are influenced by various and interdependent factors such as gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, age, educational background, and regional origins. Accordingly, no single individual should be granted the awesome weight, responsibility — or privilege — of speaking for all black people.

Now, this obvious fact holds true for *any* play or playwright, but if we recognize the relative dearth of *produced* black plays on mainstream stages in comparison to their white counterparts, we understand why this is particularly crucial for African American plays.<sup>5</sup> After all, if a mainstream theatre company produces only one black show in a production season, then by sheer numbers that play and playwright become "the" representative work of African American drama. And, likewise, if there was only one dramaturgically-minded "black voice" heard in the development or production process — be it the playwright, director or dramaturg — then, ostensibly, the process lacked the presence and promise of a far richer dialogue. Another way to think about it is this: when a mainstream theatre produces a "white play," the majority, if not all, of the creative contributors will also be white. But far from extolling platitudes of sameness, this collection of artists and thinkers will explore the work and bring to it their individual expertise and experiences, not only revealing the diversity within the world of white folks, but also recognizing — in the words of the cultural critic and theorist, Richard Dyer: "white as a colour too" (11). Consequently, it seems that the most equitable and artistically sound thing to do would be to give our African American plays (or any other culturally-specific plays, for that matter) the same rich development process. This conclusion underscores what

I have learned from my own experience: that *intra*-cultural discourse and debates around the table are just as revealing, surprising, and productive as the *inter*-cultural conversations. Thus, to have *both* offers the artistic players the ideal opportunity to explore the whole gamut of perspectives, interpretations, and meanings.

### Animating the Assertions: An Anecdote

In 1997, the (re)discovery of ten unpublished Zora Neale Hurston plays at the Library of Congress further secured Hurston's legacy as an accomplished and prolific playwright. When Cathy Madison, then literary manager of Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., read Hurston's three-act play with music, *Polk County* (1941, co-written by Dorothy Waring), she brought the play to the attention of Arena's artistic staff.<sup>6</sup> Kyle Donnelly, Arena's Associate Artistic Director, immediately became equally intrigued by the piece and for several years Donnelly and Madison lobbied for the play's production. Eventually, *Polk County* was slated to be a part of Arena Stage's 2001–2002 season. After a hugely successful run in DC, *Polk County* went on to win the Charles MacArthur Award for Outstanding New Musical. In addition, *Polk County*'s revised script, adapted by Madison and Donnelly, was later produced at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey and the Berkeley Repertory Theatre in Berkeley, California.

For the purposes of this paper, I would like to draw attention to the initial adaptation process of *Polk County*. In tackling Hurston's "rediscovered" script, Donnelly and Madison had the unenviable task of cutting down an original four-hour play to a two-hour play. Understandably, such a pronounced difference in the script's length resulted in striking contrasts between the Library of Congress version of *Polk County* and the Donnelly / Madison adaptation.<sup>7</sup> One of the most striking omissions in the adaptation is the deletion of a brief sketch in Act I, Scene II of the original script, and it is the excision of this passage on which I want to focus.

Shortly after the play's original opening (a lively wake-up song delivered to the play's lumber mill inhabitants), there is a decidedly magical moment that captures the cacklings and choreography of a single rooster character and several county hens. The stage directions read: "*The lights have come up gradually, but not very much. Rooster crows, flaps wings, begins to strut as his flock of hens follow [sic] him on*" (Hurston 283). What follows is a colorful and vernacular-rich exchange between the rooster and the hens. I have argued elsewhere that in animating these animal figures, Hurston's break from realism "grounds *Polk County* in its folkloric and anthropologic roots, underscoring Hurston's signature creative impulses as well as providing a further thematic frame for the play's exploration of gender dynamics" (Carpenter 5).<sup>8</sup> The dramaturgical significance of this scene was in no way lost on the African American co-adapter, Cathy Madison, who has repeatedly expressed her enthusiasm for the passage: "I loved that scene! One reason I loved it was because it was such a cultural, historical artifact" (Madison 2006). Nevertheless, as thematically significant and theatrical as the scene promised to be, it was inevitably excised from the adaptation.

When I first recognized the absence of the rooster / hen scenario in the adapted version of *Polk County*, my initial impulse was to examine how the process of play adaptation affected the cultural nuances inherent in the previously under-acknowledged Hurston play. With

respect to the arduous adaptation process, I wondered what had been lost versus what had been gained.<sup>9</sup> Upon asking Cathy (who is not only my former boss and colleague, but also a friend whose judgment I deeply respect) about the play's development, I was relieved to hear that she was as disappointed as I was that the scene had not survived the initial rehearsal process. Furthermore, I was surprised when I learned why these changes came about — changes that prompted me to once again think of the question Cherríe had asked of me: "How can you see an absence when you don't know there is a presence?"

Let me try to explain: After several years of trying to secure an Arena production of *Polk County*, Cathy was no longer working as the Literary Manager of Arena Stage (a position she had held for seven years). Thus, by the time rehearsals for *Polk County* began, Cathy had begun her new, full-time career in non-profit fundraising and was working as a freelance dramaturg on a part-time schedule. Since she was not present for all rehearsals, she was taken aback upon learning that the rooster / hen dance had gone from being a scene which everyone seemed to enjoy, to suddenly becoming a "taboo, ostracized piece":

When I saw it [the actors] seemed to love it...but the actors started to hate that dance because they felt that it was very "Stepin' Fetchit," which for me — well, that was a real surprise... So it turned into an issue because the actors felt that this was too regressive, so we cut it... I loved it, Kyle loved it, Dianne loved it, the musical director loved it, but the actors felt really uncomfortable with it... There was also a time thing, so I didn't stress over it too much; I didn't fight that issue, but for me it was slightly hurtful because I was looking at the whole piece as a historical, cultural document, because that set the stage for what it was — it was a folktale, and then we just left it out. (Madison 2006)

Anxiety-ridden regarding how their performance would portray blackness (and, how Arena's predominately white audience would interpret their black bodies), it was the actors rather than the creative team or the producers of Arena's *Polk County* that effectively erased the rooster / hen sequence from all subsequent productions of the script. The result: an award-winning script that was deemed appropriate for all audiences and for coast-to-coast regional consumption. While I think the accolades that *Polk County* received were impressive and well-earned, I cannot help but wonder what was lost in the process of its adaptation. Did *Polk County*'s ensemble fully understand the historic and cultural significance of the rooster / hen scene? Did they recognize what they would be missing if it were cut? Furthermore, will those who look to produce *Polk County* in the future be able to see the "historical and cultural" absence if they didn't know there had been a presence?

I raise these queries fully aware of the complicated variants at play. The primary artistic leaders of *Polk County* — the adapter / director, Kyle Donnelly, and the musical director, Stephen Wade — were white, while the adapter / dramaturg and the choreographer — Cathy Madison and the renowned dance artist Dianne McIntyre — were both black. This unusual scenario presents us with a bit of a conundrum. Arena Stage did answer the call of inclusion: there was an African American dramaturg / adapter and an African American

choreographer to help with the “balance” of the white director / adapter and white musical director. However, by all accounts the process lacked another crucial element: a rich and unrelenting dialogue.

The immense undertaking of *Polk County*, with its mutable script, many musical numbers, and cast of eighteen named characters (and dozens of ensemble roles), allowed for little time to luxuriate over textual meanings, innuendos, and interpretations. Once the play was on its feet, there was no space given to allow the cast and major artistic players to come together as a whole and substantially wrestle with the actors’ apprehensions; yet, clearly, the cast needed that time. And despite the fact that both Madison and McIntyre *could* have addressed the group’s concerns — not only as experts knowledgeable of their material, but also as individuals who are equally as invested in the representations of African Americans as the concerned actors — the opportunity was not created for them to do so.

In making these assertions, I do not mean to suggest that there was any purposeful suppression or silencing of dialogue during the rehearsal process for *Polk County*, but rather I believe there was an ultimately unintentional — yet highly effective — lack of recognition for the *need* for a deeper discussion on race and racialized perceptions. This striking set of circumstances cautions us to remember how contentious the issue of race still is in the public imagination, and also offers us another way to consider the impact of cross-cultural artistry in the world of theatre. As Madison aptly points out, *Polk County* is *not* a play about race or racial issues per se, but rather it is “a play about a very specific, unique black community” (Madison 2010). Perhaps the artistic leadership did not foresee a need to talk through the cultural context of the piece and, in Cathy’s absence, felt that cutting the scene was more efficient than taking the extra time to wrestle with it. Perhaps it was the *intra*-cultural dynamic that thwarted deeper conversations. Maybe the ensemble (leadership included) was less inclined to initiate a cross-cultural dialogue on “black” material in a misguided expression of sensitivity? Whatever the reason, there was the perception of a cultural divide that was ultimately compounded by the absence of an inclusive, affirming conversation among the ensemble. This, in turn, affected the actors’ sense of security: “It was a tricky situation,” admits Cathy, “[*Polk County*] is a very black show by a very black writer, but there was this white director and white musical director so the actors were protecting themselves; they were protecting themselves from looking like fools on the stage” (Madison 2006).<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the experience of *Polk County* reveals how the innovation of inclusion is not just about acquiring African American leadership, but about using it to its fullest potential.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it is about being forthright and brave enough to engage in the difficult conversation. We are not “post-racial” yet — biases, tensions, trepidations, as well as the material consequences of racism are still with us and must be wrestled with in order to be understood and conquered. On this point, I am reminded of the words and images that Morgan Jenness thoughtfully offered when I spoke of these concerns at the 2009 LMDA conference in Washington, DC. Jenness attested that sometimes we have to “wade through the mud” of racial dialogue in order to get to the other side. I could not agree with her more. Talking about race is not always clean, easy, or comfortable — in fact, it can often be the opposite — yet we can reap great rewards from the necessary drudgery.

Luckily, however, “drudgery” is not a prerequisite for fruitful, cross-cultural conversations on race — far from it. With that said, I would like to take a brief moment to share one of my most recent experiences as an African American dramaturg working with a white director. For the past three years I have had the great privilege and pleasure of working at Baltimore’s CenterStage as a freelance production dramaturg. In 2009, I dramaturged Lynn Nottage’s *Fabulation: Or the Re-Education of Undine* — an experience which was illuminating for me in that it gave me a greater appreciation of what can be gained from working with a non-black director (in this case, Jackson Gay) on an African American play.

*Fabulation*, a highly comedic romp, is rich with African and African American cultural references, yet it is also equally indebted to European folktales and literature. Upon first reading the play, however, my professional expertise as well as my communal acculturation prompted me to immediately recognize the need to illuminate its “black parts.” I knew that I would need to think through critical theories (from W.E.B. DuBois’s 1903 theory of double-consciousness to John L. Jackson, Jr.’s 2005 notion of “racial sincerity”) as well as bring forth material on a bevy of subjects from Yoruban spirituality and African American folktales to hip hop. But it was my first telephone conversation with Jackson Gay — and the opportunity to see the script through her eyes — that allowed me to gain a fuller understanding of how the Afrocentric and Eurocentric elements of the play *worked together*.

Of course there were European-influenced aspects of Nottage’s play that my routine dramaturgical work would have addressed even without talking to the director (for instance, the fact that *Fabulation* is a contemporary re-telling of the 1811 German novella *Undine*; or that *Undine*, the protagonist in Nottage’s play, shares the name of the protagonist in Edith Wharton’s 1913 novel, *A Custom of the Country*). However, it was not the investigation and reporting of such details that were fruitful inasmuch as it was the dialogue itself that was revealing. It was about recognizing the particularities of Jackson’s own interests, cultural lens, and personal investment *in relation to mine*: not as opposing viewpoints, but as truly *complementary* readings, thereby granting me a fuller understanding about the potential readings of the script.

Admittedly, there were some race-related issues (including the problematic concept of “cultural authenticity”) that I brought to light during table work that failed to prompt further discussion at the time. Nevertheless, I knew that it was important to bring the ideas to our attention in order to determine whether or not the actors needed to engage with them further. Although the issues proved not to be of great concern for the ensemble, my preparedness to discuss them was not all for naught. These same issues were raised by audience members during a number of post-show discussions, assuring me of their significance despite the fact that we didn’t expound upon them during the rehearsal process. This latter point reminds us of the fact that our service as dramaturgs extends beyond rehearsals and workshops. The benefit of wrestling with potential concerns and exposing ourselves to diverse cultural lenses during our play-making process further prepares us to engage in the complex and sometimes unexpected conversations with our audience members.



## Closing Notes: And Now, a “Flipping of the Script”

Earlier in this article I conjured the sentiments of the great American playwright, August Wilson. In an attempt to explain his desire to have a black director for *Fences*, Wilson famously asserted in *The New York Times* that his dramatic work was best served if staged by someone who shares “the common cultural ground” of his characters (Wilson, “I Want a Black Director” A25). I think the benefits of Wilson’s scenario are clear enough, although I do not believe that such an arrangement is necessary for a worthy staging of African American drama. I raise Wilson’s argument, however, because he makes a significant observation that often goes unrecognized in lieu of the more titillating accusations of “separatism” (Brustein). With the brevity of a poet — for that is what he was — Wilson often said, “I am what is known as [...] a race man” (Wilson, “The Ground” 15-16). He used “race” as a shorthand term that encompassed his complex understanding of African American identity. Wilson clearly asserts that melanin and a history of enslaved ancestry does not qualify one as a good director (or dramaturg) of African American plays, and moreover, he highlights the fact that there is a difference between “race” and “culture.”

As we well know, traditional concepts of blackness are based on tenuous notions of biology, bloodline, and phenotypical appearance. Despite the fact that these supposed signifiers of community membership are highly problematic, they still exert a tremendous influence on how we construct our perceived identities. To that end, it is not the sheer ability for someone to check “black” on the US Census box that promises that he or she will offer valuable contributions to the creative process. At the heart of this assertion is the need to recognize the difference between identifications of race and culture. Furthermore, the fact that a director or dramaturg is racially identified as black, doesn’t necessarily make her or him the best choice for a particular project — one’s identifiable (or phenotypical) racial makeup says nothing about how one identifies culturally or socially. Thus, I am simply suggesting that theaters hire black artists and contributors who actually express a personal investment in African American culture, which can be further enriched with useful research and a strong dramaturgical sensibility.

And finally, while I have tried to address the role of dramaturgical figures in African American theatre, I would be remiss if I did not add that black dramaturgs and directors can do more than just work on “black shows.” This is not a personal lament. I happen to be a freelance dramaturg who embraces the opportunity to focus on African American drama: It is my area of scholarly specialization; it is the material that I most often teach; it is the material on which I am building my publishing career; and, most important, it is work that I love. However, for the many directors and dramaturgs of color out there — and there are more than many of us realize — the call for inclusion and diversity extends to the challenge of de-segregating dramaturgy. We can do other things besides work on “the black plays” for a theatre’s upcoming development workshop, play festival, or February production. I hope that those who aspire toward the “innovation of inclusion” will not only seek more directors and dramaturgs of color, but that they will offer these artists of color the same employment opportunities given to their white counterparts, thereby uniformly disrupting conventional race-based hiring practices. After all, we are not that hard to find, we are out there, and we welcome the opportunity to join the table.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank *Review* Editor D.J. Hopkins, *Review* Guest Editor Sydné Mahone, and *Review* Associate Editor Sydney Cheek O’Donnell for their insightful queries, comments, and suggestions in the writing of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to remember that this discussion was in reference to a production for a pedagogical institution. I do not know, nor would I dare to assume, Moraga’s feelings towards non-traditional casting practices outside of institutions of learning. I, for one, do not believe that non-traditional casting should be exercised with uniform ease, but rather that it should be addressed on a play-by-play basis with due consideration regarding the specific text in question. For a number of thoughtful and revelatory explorations of non-traditional casting practices, see Debra Cardona’s article in this issue of *Review*.

<sup>3</sup> I hope it goes without saying that the issue only becomes relevant when the play is dealing with a racialized context. If cultural or racial issues are not inherently part of the play, then I see no need to pay particular attention to the cultural specificity of the director or dramaturg. However — as I argue here — I believe that diverse artistic leadership inherently offers a richer dialogue. Furthermore, in conjuring August Wilson I am referring to the playwright’s controversial *New York Times* editorial, “I Want a Black Director” (September 26, 1990). In the article, Wilson laments the fact that studio heads at Paramount Pictures decided to forego his request for an African American to direct the film version of his Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Fences*. Rather than honor Wilson’s request, Paramount Pictures simply failed to bring the film to the screen after purchasing the rights in 1987. While many are familiar with the Wilson piece, the nuance of his request often goes without full acknowledgment. It is this latter observation that is of particular interest to me and to which I return later in this article.

<sup>4</sup> By referencing the need for a “dramaturgical figure” in rehearsal, I am specifying a person who may or may not have the official title of “dramaturg,” but who is fully devoted to the dramaturgical task of research and investigative inquiries. This may be a dramaturg proper or it may be a dramaturgically minded director. While valuable contributions may come from others (i.e. from actors or designers), it is particularly helpful to have a figure whose primary responsibility is to aid the playwright in verifying the historical accuracy, cultural fluency, and / or textual strength of the script.

<sup>5</sup> While my discussion here focuses on the production of African American works, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the reprehensible lack of other minoritized playwrights on “mainstream” stages.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Waring was a white socialite and the wife of *Polk County*’s prospective Broadway producer. The fact that she was credited as co-author of Hurston’s play most likely represents the business relationship between Hurston and the Warings rather than indicating that Dorothy Waring made any significant contributions to the script.

<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this paper I am comparing the Library of Congress version of the Hurston script as published in *From Luababa to Polk County: Zora Neale Hurston Plays at the Library of Congress* with the Donnelly / Madison adaptation as typed and bound for the Berkeley Repertory Theatre dated 12/3/2004.

<sup>8</sup> In 2006, I wrote a paper “‘Present/ing the Past’: Reading Zora Neale Hurston’s *Polk County* at the Cultural Crossroads” for a working session at the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) conference. In “Present/ing the Past” I noted how the editor of the Hurston play anthology, Charles Mitchell, suggests that the rooster / hen scene would probably never have been staged if the play had been produced as originally planned. In response, I suggest that many playwrights — including August Wilson — are known for creating “realistic” plays that make intentional breaks from realism.

<sup>9</sup> While a qualitative analysis of the adapted script is beyond the scope of this paper, I did offer a comparative analysis of the Polk County scripts in the paper cited above (“‘Present/ing the Past’”). I am indebted to *Polk Country*’s dramaturg, Cathy Madison, for sharing her insight and materials with me, thereby making such a comparative analysis possible. I am currently revising this conference paper for future publication.

<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, when asked directly if she thought having a black director would have made a difference, Madison said she did: “If it had been a black director I think it would have been different. I think that scene would have stayed in. I think it would have helped with a lot of problems.” The “problems” Madison was referring to, of course, were not challenges that crippled the commercial success of the Arena Stage production, but rather moments throughout the play’s rehearsal in which the actors — and therefore the script itself — were affected by the discomfort or unease that existed during the play’s development process.

<sup>11</sup> While I am attempting to highlight the need for African American process leadership in the creative process, I would like to share and reinforce the insight offered by *Review*’s Editor, D.J. Hopkins, who rightly noted that these assertions extend beyond a dramaturg’s cultural identification. In the words of Hopkins, “Is it not also about giving a dramaturg (African American or not) the time and space in which to do her job: start dialogue and build community and consensus?”

## Works Cited

- Brustein, Robert. “Subsidized Separatism.” *American Theatre* 13.8 (1996): 26–27. Academic Search Premier. Web. 10 June 2010.
- DuBois, W.E.B. “The Souls of Black Folk.” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: Norton, 1997, 613–739.
- Carpenter, Faedra Chatard. “‘Present/ing the Past’: Reading Zora Neale Hurston’s *Polk County* at the Cultural Crossroads.” ASTR Conference Paper, 2005.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Polk County* (1941). *From Luababa to Polk County: Zora Neale Hurston Plays at the Library of Congress*. Eds. Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell. Baltimore: Apprentice House, 2005.
- Jackson, John L., Jr. *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Dyer, Richard. *White*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Madison, Cathy. Telephone interview. 8 Nov. 2006.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Re: Polk County Excerpt.” E-mail to the author. 21 March 2010.

Wilson, August. “I Want a Black Director.” *The New York Times*. 26 Sept. 1990: A25.

Wilson, August. “The Ground on Which I Stand.” *American Theatre* 13.7 (1996): 14-16, 71–74. Academic Search Premier. Web 10 June 2010.



# BACK TO BLACK

## A Response to Contemplations on the Dramaturgical Landscape for African American Theatre (in a Time of Obama)

**By Otis Ramsey-Zöe**

OTIS RAMSEY-ZÖE is a freelance dramaturg, Series Editor for NoPassport Press's *Dreaming the Americas Series*, and Administrator for The Classical Theatre of Harlem's *Future Classics Reading Series*. He has developed new works with The Sundance Institute, Kennedy Center, Arena Stage, Center Stage, and White House Historical Association, among others. He holds an MA in Performance Studies from New York University and a BA from University of Notre Dame.

### Scene

*(Two figures, ONE and NOT-ONE)*

**NOT-ONE:** Watch your step. That ground isn't sure.

*(Gazing downward, ONE hesitantly lifts a foot, perhaps to take a step, perhaps to take a closer look at where s/he is standing.)*

**NOT-ONE:** I... Well, if I were you, I wouldn't do that either.

*(Beat)*

*(Beat)*

*(End)*

For the 2009 LMDA Conference in Washington, DC, I was invited to serve as Respondent on a panel organized by Sydné Mahone and Faedra Chatard Carpenter entitled *Shifting Boundaries: Perspectives from African American Dramaturgs*. The panel was facilitated by Sydné and featured Faedra along with Debra Cardona. As Respondent, I saw my role as primarily that of a "listener" charged with thinking between and beside the panelists' presentations. My listening took on the form of posing questions, and if I accomplished anything that day it was to interrogate the presentations in relation to the unique conditions of the current zeitgeist of hyper racial awareness — rich with optimism, apparitions, assurance, and assumptions. My approach, then, to this task of producing an article from those myriad, ephemeral musings has been to navigate through my personal notes and build a bridge between my citations and the dialogue as I remember it. "Fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a bumpy night!"<sup>1</sup> In order to more smoothly approach these bumps, I address the questions posed by Sydné that guided our conversations: "How do we begin to map the current dramaturgical landscape for African American theatre? ...[And] how does it affect the discussion of Black aesthetics?"<sup>2</sup>

My initial thoughts on these questions concern the racial politics inherent in producing work by African American or black writers; however, the issue is complicated by the ways in which identity may be acknowledged. I begin by cross-examining Sydné's questions. What is a black aesthetic? In *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, Darby English asks: "What makes 'black art' black? What functions have to be performed successfully in order to secure that identification? What legitimates that identification as a positive one? And, What *other* kinds of work does the positive racial identification of an artwork permit one to do?" (31). In regard to the query pertaining to the blackness of black art, Debra Cardona carefully and wisely delineates between *African American* and *black* and, in doing so, invites us to remain mindful that the terms are not precise synonyms for one another. In a certain sense, identifying a piece of work as black art is a straightforward, albeit convoluted, task; somehow, it is akin to identifying hard-core pornography: "[You] know it when you see it."<sup>3</sup> Still, it is useful to consider, at least, a few of the complex systems of markers that corroborate our assessments.

In efforts to identify black work, on one hand, we can begin with the black body; in doing so, we must consider the relationship between the black body of the artist (if indeed there is one), blackness as a social and discursive phenomenon, and black art.<sup>4</sup> We may, on the other hand, consider the work itself, which requires contemplating how narrative, content, structure and other formal elements are engaged in such a way as to warrant labeling as a *black* work. "To speak of 'the work itself' is to face the prospect of multifaceted, speculative analysis that is considerate of the many paths artists take on the way to selfhood and representation" (English 83). These two conditions perform in concert with one another. As illustrated in Debra's article, an exciting site of innovation is the way in which companies like The Classical Theatre of Harlem (CTH) engage in interrogation of identity as inherent in the work itself, in relationship to authorship of a work, and in constant renegotiation of a black canon. In contrast, Faedra shows how honoring manifestations of identity within a text may be inadvertently compromised by the racial composition of the artistic team on a given project.

Both Debra and Faedra provide fruitful meditations on the current landscape by commenting on the ways in which different factions approach the task of producing work by African American writers. Faedra's article considers African American work presented within institutions and under circumstances wherein there is no perceived *exclusive* commitment to African American stories, which is to say that such work exists as one offering on a menu of many options. At the same time, Debra's piece focuses specifically on CTH where, in terms of audience, there is an intrinsic expectation that the productions will speak to and feature artists from African American communities. She illustrates one key point: CTH uses its position within the Harlem community in order to challenge and even expand the limits of a work's capacity to speak to an African American experience, and to expand the consideration of which plays should participate in such conversations.

These ruminations on differing institutional audiences produce useful, if not complex, questions on spectatorship. For a given African American or black play, who is the audience? For whom is the work being produced? Among the many audiences, there is the audience for a specific play, the audience for a particular theatre, and the audi-

ence in terms of the larger community where a piece is being produced. For any given project at a given theatre within a given community, how do the various performances of the term *audience* influence the collaborative process? Who gets invited by the institution to be a collaborator? My experience teaches me that audience is not the single most important variable in artistic decision-making; however, it is a key factor, since live theatre hinges upon an encounter between viewer and performer, even if these roles are fashioned in an atypical manner. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to note audience in relation to artistic decisions because theatre reflects a greater reality outside of an institution's walls and beyond the text on a page. In my effort to map the current dramaturgical landscape for African American theatre, I find it most useful to consider the way in which theatre and theaters reflect a specific moment.

With respect to questions of audience, it is important to acknowledge that our panel conversation centered on models and institutions that are themselves a part of or engaging with a mainstream way of producing theatre. A companion to our panel might modify our guiding questions to consider alternative models such as touring circuits and festivals as well as output from Historically Black Colleges and Universities. As the mainstream provides our investigative foundation, it is valuable to note that the conceptual potentiality for a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-gender audience is a recent phenomenon. Speaking specifically of literature, Toni Morrison observes, "For reasons that should not need explanation here, until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white" (xii). Here, what is most interesting is the notion of *positioning* — that only recently within American literary and mainstream theatrical practice have artists been permitted to imagine a reader or viewer as non-white. As such, when assembling an artistic team for a black play, it is important to consider not only, "Who is the writer?" and "Who is the audience?" but also, "How does the narrative, content, or structure of a piece position the audience?" It is crucial for institutions to critically assess their own decisions and rationales that explain why African American directors and dramaturgs are, or are not, invited as collaborators on African American plays.

## Scene

*(Disclaimer: The following is a work of satire. While, as in fiction, the literary perceptions and insights are based on experience, all names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are exaggerations. While reference to any real person is intended none should be inferred. This is not that; neither is it not not that.)*

**INSTITUTIONAL REPRESENTATIVE:** Well, Black Dramaturg, hello. Have a seat. We are so thrilled about this potential opportunity for collaboration because we have a project that we believe is a good fit for you. We are producing a wonderful black play written by a non-black writer. It is brilliant and so real; it's just real and moving. It's not a perfect piece, and that's why we need you onboard. There are some things in the script that should be changed; they won't be. We want to hear what you have to say about the text and the production, but we won't actually *do* anything with *anything* you tell us. We just feel so strongly about having you in the room, which reminds me, it

doesn't matter whether you attend rehearsals or not. In fact, it's easier if you don't, then no one has to pretend to listen to you, agreed? Agreed. NO! Wait! Strike that. We need you present; it'll make the actors feel better. Now, where we also really need you — and this is why we feel that it's so crucial to have a black dramaturg on this — is for audience talkbacks and to be the face of the play in the community. We anticipate that some of our African American audience members, in particular, will have a problem with this play, especially if they catch wind that all of the actual artistic decisions are made by white people. Well, *technically* we didn't *anticipate* it. The black guy who works here — I forget his name — was outraged and said that everybody was going to be outraged. So, holy cow, here we are! Now, with you as the face of the play in the community, we are really going to dodge a bullet on this one... because, let's be honest, there are some serious racial representation problems here (*gesturing to the institution*) and here (*gesturing to the script*). What d'ya say?

**BLACK DRAMATURG:** Huh!

(End)

A dangerous and uncomfortable pitfall that I have encountered in my artistic career, one that is not uncommon, is the practice of “playing black” for white audiences. In her article, Faedra wrenchingly recalls such an occasion in her reflection on the *Polk County* cast's response to certain dance episodes in the show.<sup>5</sup> In this instance, it appears that having a white director staging the piece for a substantially white subscription audience ultimately affected the adaptation. Not surprisingly, the actors' responses to Hurston's text echo the type of criticism she encountered throughout her career. Yet, inasmuch as “playing black” places an artist in a compromising position, an individual may also wring from it a spot of power and authority. In one such experience, working on a project by a white author about black people, I was able to leverage my identifiable blackness as cultural authority in order to secure necessary changes. In another instance, I declined an employment opportunity altogether because I feared that I was being invited in to sanction problematic representations of black people in a piece penned by a white author. If I had thought that my participation on the latter project could have recuperated the misguided images in the play, I may have been inclined to accept the job.

When African American artists engage with projects containing flawed depictions, they indeed run the risk of legitimizing such portraits. This burden of representation reproduces itself perpetually because identity is as public and participatory as it is private and individually rooted. Building upon Judith Butler's claim in *Precarious Life* that an identity is not “precisely a possession, but, rather... a mode of being dispossessed, a way of being *for* another or *by virtue of another*” (24), Darby English contends that “identity is an instrument with which we submit to, and enter relationships of responsibility with, one another” (286). Both theoretical claims situate identity as an effect of actions that are public and collective. Today, this tension between collective and individual identity oscillates against proclamations of our arrival at a post-racial America, which — as Faedra points out — is propelled by Obama's election. Interestingly enough, sustained, albeit indolent, movement of minority artists into mainstream art worlds, including theatres and academies, predates current post-racial fascinations.

So, how does this momentum towards increased participation and presence in mainstream theatre and academies affect the discussion of Black<sup>6</sup> aesthetics? Debra reflects on CTH's efforts to expand the canon of black work. In contrast, Faedra examines the practice of theatre companies producing work by African American dramatists, sans an African American dramaturg and / or director. In her discussion, she explores the terrain of absence and reflects on how such non-presence performs a type of violence. One common culprit for the decision to proceed in such cases without an African American dramaturg or director is rooted in the professed universality of the text being produced. Declarations of a play's accessibility and capacity to communicate meaning, context, and event beyond the racial and cultural specifications of the play are used as justification for not including an African American dramaturg or director. This rush towards universality in these instances runs the risk of reducing or even eliminating racial presence within the piece. Without rehearsing Faedra's entire complex argument, I place it in conversation with Morrison's consideration of how the presence of the racial other shaped early American writers. In doing so, I encourage reflection on how this presence surfaces today in relation to theatre. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison contends:

The world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion. The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act. Pouring rhetorical acid on the fingertips of a black hand may indeed destroy the prints, but not the hand. Besides, what happens in that violent, self-serving act of erasure to the hands, the fingers, the fingerprints of the one who does the pouring? Do they remain acid-free? The literature itself suggests otherwise. (46)

In certain instances, omitting African American directors and dramaturgs from productions of African American plays enforces racelessness in ways akin to Morrison's description. And, as Morrison cautions, these attempts never succeed at eliminating race, and the violence done to the script by the institutions and artists never goes unnoticed. As a similar example, I once saw a production of a Tennessee Williams play that the director wanted to re-set in Middle America. Despite eliminating the Southern dialect and employing a regionally indistinct set design, when lights rose on the opening scene, the play inescapably shone its Southern-ness; Tennessee's script had won. However, as Faedra illustrates, the imposition of racelessness may occur even if a black dramaturg is included as a collaborator. She cites an example of conversations on racialized issues that were excluded during the rehearsal process, but that arose consistently in post-show discussion. Having an African American dramaturg on a production only addresses an issue of representation; in order to better serve the play, the dramaturg must also help facilitate these potentially uncomfortable conversations. I see these efforts at downplaying the need to engage in racial discourse as one symptom of the current post-racial fantasy, which is entrenched in mainstream society.

As African American artists move into the mainstream, they increasingly must contend with post-racial longings that encourage a post-black approach to black work. Yet, I am fascinated by the innate, vibrant contradictions of the term *post-black*, which according to Thelma Golden “ultimately [means] embracing and rejecting the notion of such a thing at the very same time” (14). In theatre, the

propensity towards universality, and the upsurge of what Faedra identifies as a Wilsonian style of production, affirms that what is moving into the mainstream is not black, necessarily, but post-black; or, in the language of fashion: Post-black is the new black. However, the current usage of “post-black” in mainstream society differs from its original deployment by artists.

The term *post-black* emerged as shorthand for “post-black art,” a concept invented in the late 1990s by Golden, curator and executive director of The Studio Museum in Harlem, and Glenn Ligon, an African American artist. The term functioned as an escape from the racial boxes in which black artists were placed. The concept was employed both ironically and seriously, and was embraced by artists who adamantly refused, in Golden’s words, “being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact, deeply interested in redefining complex notions of blackness” (14). Mary Schmidt Campbell adds further insight: “The rebelliousness of a phrase like ‘post-black art,’ in part, is resistance to habits of mind that inhibit the ability of viewers to have an opportunity to see and experience the work of black artists unmediated by a predisposition of one kind or another” (321).

As originally conceived and utilized, post-black was an innovation, particularly as a technology for escaping outwardly imposed limitations placed on artists by virtue of possessing black skin. Presently however, post-black has been comingled with the notion of post-racial, and consequently co-opted by those insisting on our national arrival at sought-after equality and harmony. In our current atmosphere, the term post-black fails to do what it once did, which is to open up a space where the work of artists may be viewed on its own terms sans prejudgments based on race. Drenched in illusion, the term now fails to serve artists or their work. We are now witnessing the chaos<sup>7</sup> caused by the term’s appropriation, which recalls E. Ethelbert Miller’s reflection: “How has language distracted us from defining ourselves as well as our work? Words enter our vocabulary often acting like predators. They circle what we do with the capacity of creating havoc” (23). In order to combat the mayhem<sup>8</sup> encouraged by this term and awry manifestations of its ideas, institutions as well as artists must counter the mainstream’s elevation of this ideal by creating a space to hold those uncomfortable conversations about race.

One way that dramaturgs can elevate the national discussion on race in this time of Obama is by understanding and educating others on the nuances of post-racial discourse. It seems to me that mainstream America has committed to the concept of the post-racial as an arrival at a state of cohesion without acknowledging that concept conversely underscores a hyper-awareness. This dismissal of otherness masks anxieties about otherness as well as fears associated with the rising dominance of these various others. The dramaturg’s task, then, is to critically interrogate practices that affirm this current fantasy and to move the conversation away from the alluring façade of this unattained utopia. It is the dramaturg’s responsibility to usher dialogue toward more honesty, even though this task may be difficult. In addition, fundamentally, dramaturgs must remain ever committed to honoring the needs of the text despite this atmosphere of national delusion. What else can dramaturgs do to elevate the national discussion on race? I’m still listening.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bette Davis as Margo Channing in *All About Eve*. Dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Perfs. Bette Davis, Anne Baxter. Twentieth Century Fox, 1950.

<sup>2</sup> As moderator, Sydné Mahone presented a wealth of stimulating questions that guided the panel discussion. She asked: “How do we begin to map the current dramaturgical landscape for African American theatre? Where are the sites of innovation? As playwrights and dramaturgs move into the mainstream theatres and academies, while directors and producers remain on the fringe, how does it affect the discussion of Black aesthetics? How do these dynamics alter the cultural agenda for African American theatre in the 21st century? How can dramaturgs elevate the national discussion on race?”

<sup>3</sup> Here, I summon Justice Potter Stewart’s concurring opinion in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* 378 U.S. 184 (1964), regarding possible obscenity in *The Lovers (Les Amants)*, a 1958 French film directed by Louis Malle. Justice Stewart writes, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description [“hard-core pornography”]; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that.” Justice Stewart’s critical assessment, “I know it when I see it,” demonstrates the tension between that which is observable, subjective, and not identifiable via a definitive rubric.

<sup>4</sup> Here, as well as above, I shift between the terms “art” and “theatre,” aware that the former situates the discourse in a larger context while the latter grounds it in the specifics of this occasion.

<sup>5</sup> Referring to the world premiere adaptation of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Polk County*, as adapted by Cathy Madison and Kyle Donnelly at Arena Stage in 2002. Essentially, some cast members shared concerns that certain moments in the show excessively conjured “Stepin Fetchit”; in response, script rewrites instituted cuts that hugely affected the folkloric sensibility of Hurston’s original script. For more on this production, see “The Innovation of Inclusion: Dramaturgy in the Mythos of a ‘Post-Racial Era,’” by Faedra Chatard Carpenter in this issue of *Review*.

<sup>6</sup> Here and once previously in this article, I use “Black” with a capital “B” when citing Sydné Mahone’s question regarding “Black aesthetics.” In these instances, I preserve Sydné’s “Black” in acknowledgment of a greater work being performed: “Black” (uppercase “B”) suggests a larger idea and carries political weight; whereas, “black” (lowercase “b”) implies identity.

<sup>7</sup> Here, the chaos of words reflects on my previous discussion of identity as collective and individual. Under such circumstances and in this climate of hyper-racism, a single term may perform both erasure and amplification of racial identity. Similarly, I am also evoking the chaos of being perceived as — or more directly, made into — that which one is not, which is made possible by private and public negotiations of identity. This is one illustration of Fred Moten’s assertion (by way of Denis Diderot and Wallace Stevens) that “race endangers what it [is] meant to protect” (224).

<sup>8</sup> See note 7.



## Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. "Violence, Mourning, Politics." *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2003: 19–49.
- Campbell, Mary Schmidt. "African American Art in a Post-Black Era." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17.3 (2007): 317–30.
- English, Darby. *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.
- Golden, Thelma. "Introduction: Post..." *Freestyle*. New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001: 14–15.
- Miller, E. Ethelbert. "Dancing to the New Music: What will become of the poem and the novel in this new century of rapid transformation?" *The Nation* 15 March 2010: 23.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Moten, Fred. "Preface for a Solo by Miles Davis." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17.2 (2007): 217–46.