

African American Women in the Performing Arts

When I write about place, I'm writing about family, about us, still trying to rebuild and redefine our families after the ravages of enslavement. I'm still trying to create a place that feels like home when we are so far from home.
(Pearl Cleage)

Each of us is our own author, director, producer and star. In each moment, we have the power, the unalienable right to alter our actions and reinterpret the circumstances of our lives. In each moment, we have the freedom to speak, *write and invent our own scripts*.
(Barbara Ann Teer)

Introduction

Throughout the history of performing arts, self and community have always been inextricably linked to African American women's incessant search to find the place they needed, and, as black women, were not allowed to have in North American society. Angela Davis's use of the term "aesthetic community of resistance" (Davis, *Women*, 201) can apply to the alternative and transformative models presented by African American women playwrights and performers within a range of womanist sites built in their works. After the 1970s, when black women's artistic movement grew especially strong, the community of black women began to expand into what today can be considered a Pan-African movement that includes African American, African and Caribbean (Hill, *Call and Response*, 1804) as ~~it is~~ reflected in these women's creations for the stage.

When referring to African American women in the performing arts, Lorraine Hansberry and Alice Childress (playwrights) or Katherine Dunham (dancer/choreographer) would probably be the first names that come to mind as forerunners of contemporary female playwrights and performance artists. Nevertheless, although it was in the late 1950s when African American playwrights began to receive acknowledgement, it was not until the 1970s that they became fully recognized by scholars and critics; and it has only been after the 1980s and 1990s that more and more African American women playwrights and performers from the first half of the twentieth century have come to light thanks to the extensive research conducted by scholars such as James V. Hatch, Ted Shine, Leo Hamalian, Kathy A. Perkins and Elizabeth Brown-Guillory. These scholars have published various anthologies that include a significant number of the plays written by African American women before 1950.¹

The incessant social and artistic movements against injustice and discrimination led by African American men and women did actually inspire the birth of both North American and international women's movement at the end of nineteenth century and during the 1970s—the antilynching movements stirred the late nineteenth century women's movement,² on the one hand; and the Civil Rights Movement and Black Arts Movement of the contributed to the birth of the 1970s Women's Liberation Movement, on the other. However, the history of African Americans, permeated by their constant struggle against oppression to achieve freedom and civil rights made it even more difficult for African American women to opt for a public genre that had been almost exclusively reserved for men: the performing arts whether directing, performing and/or writing a play. These performance artists, however, have played an active role in the African American tradition by always being at the front of their struggle against injustice. The first black abolitionist woman Maria W. Stewart, writer and orator, in a manifesto written in 1831, proposed physical force to achieve freedom and encouraged black women to obtain formal education for their own independence as well as for their people's

achievement on further political advancement (Hill, *Call and Response*, 226); or abolitionist and activist Harriet Tubman helped many slaves to escape to the North; or Frances Ellen Watkins Harper took her poetry to the people as poets of the 1960s would do during the Black Arts Movement.

African American women, many of which were performance artists, led the antilynching movement, made speeches and wrote on racial and gender rights—i.e., Sojourner Truth and Frances E. W. Harper. The first poems and narratives by African American women pioneered the perspective of double victimization both black and female in literary genres, which has continued to be central in all works written and performed by black women artists. The roots of black feminism, then, can be found in the women's narratives and autobiographies written by African American women at the end of the nineteenth century. Playwright Anna Julia Cooper, for instance, wrote a collection of speeches and essays in 1892 in a volume entitled *A Voice from the South* in which feminist black thought was articulated and advanced. A few years later during the Harlem Renaissance, playwright Eulalie Spence (a black Caribbean woman) wrote an essay "On Being Young—A Woman—And Colored" (1925) equally considered to be a landmark for its powerful critique on a society that "devalued women and blacks" (Brown-Guillory, *Wines*, 1). On the other hand, together with Cooper, Mary Church Terrell—also a playwright—and Ida B. Wells-Barnett founded in 1896 founded the National Association for Colored Women, which demonstrates how the women of this era set the basis for future African American women's activism (Hill, *Call and Response*, 553). Either with their pen, their oratory or their organization skills, from early times African American women have always demanded justice and fought for their community's freedom as they eradicated stereotypical notions held against their community in general and against black womanhood in particular. continuous

Throughout their history of unremitting endurance since slavery times, African American women did never accept the subjugated position into which they were placed, and have indefatigably worked to find a womanist space that allowed them and their community both to feel free and whole, and the performing arts was the ideal alternative site to that purpose. In this sense, Black feminist Barbara Christian focuses on the position of the African American woman as one who needed “to generate her own definition to survive for she found that she was forced to deny essential aspects of herself to fit the definitions of others” (*Black Feminist*, 161). It is out of a political continuum of black women that a womanist ideology emerged defined by Alice Walker in her book *In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) as black feminism, a philosophy that shows women who love each other sexually or nonsexually, and focuses on women's culture and emotions, music and dance (qtd. in Wilkerson, “Introduction,” xi). The Combahee River Collective expands on the concept offered by Walker and assert that as feminists they “believe in collective process and a non-hierarchical distribution of power within [their] own group and in [their] vision of a revolutionary society” (Combahee, “A Black Feminist,” 21). Walker and the Combahee River Collective clearly establish community and self as inseparable in their conception of black feminism, which is strongly linked to the performing arts.

In the same line, Judith L. Stephens argues that African American women [artists](#) have developed a cultural legacy of self-sufficiency and collective, and their networks working through all historical periods “provide a site for examining a ‘womanist consciousness’ in which the concepts of self and community are not seen as separate entities (“The Harlem Renaissance,” 100).³ African American women, such as playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson, took the lead of the antilynching movement during the 1920s. They wrote and performed against lynching, and these creations became a “source of womanist/feminist” theatre (Stephens, “Lynching Dramas,” 5). Since early twentieth century, African American

theatre writers and performers have continued to maintain a womanist site, [incorporating](#) their family, their community, their bodies and their selves. They have never forgotten, though, that African American women's liberation is just one aspect "of the need to liberate the total society from dehumanization," being always aware that it is the social system that must change (Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-Creating Ourselves*, 214-5).

The new sites created by African American women for the stage are usually female-centered which, according to Gloria Hull, "constituted a first line of resistance" ("Researching," 193). Those sites presented in their theatrical pieces become transgressive as they help revise, reconstruct and broaden African American's history. They also provide space where women are able to construct their identity and develop their personal, social and sexual needs. In addition, those sites offer healing for the women characters, for the actors who rehearse in that woman-centered space and for the reader/audience that is introduced to and participates of new alternative models. Since the nineteenth century, most of these new sites designed by African American women in their theatrical creations have always incorporated songs, music, dance, children's games, poetry, and/or prayers and, in more recent works, different types of technology (slides, video projections, microphones, etc.).⁴ This combination of artistic elements parallels the creative compositions of African American dancers Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus who incorporated lyrics, poetry and oral literature into their choreographies, which Dunham considered part of the African aesthetic (in Emery, *Black Dance*, vii).

Many of the African American women playwrights and performers have founded their own theatre/performance companies, directed, performed, and/or produced their own work as well as helped design and establish new theatre buildings within the black community. This is the case of Barbara Ann Teer who in 1968 founded the National Black Theatre, still in operation. Even during the Harlem Renaissance, at a time when black women were not

especially trained for the theatre, they ventured to direct and produce their plays at schools halls, kitchens, library basements, lodges, yards, churches (Perkins, *Black Female Playwrights*, 16). One of the best advocates in community theatre at this time was Eulalie Spence, who initiated a movement that left the trend of the “plays to be read” written by the majority of her contemporary colleagues (Brown-Guillory, *Wines*, 40). Therefore, these playwrights followed Du Bois’s philosophy about black theater: it should be written by, about, for black people and performed near the black community.

Plays, usually regarded as a corpus of drama, are pieces to be performed by actors on the stage in front of an audience.⁵ The significance of the oral tradition within African American history is obvious for it has pervaded all literary genres (i.e., transference of the rhythms of music and speech, and/or the call and response pattern to the written text), and in many cases, those literary works (narrative or poetry) have been read aloud to large audiences. Consequently, it could be deduced that drama (as a text to be performed) or any other creation for performance should be the genre par excellence in which the elements of the African American oral tradition would be especially highlighted. In this regard, referring to African American drama and performance, Sandra Richards reminds that when examining a dramatic written text, the critic must analyze the text but also the “absent potential,” and “offer informed accounts of the latent intertexts likely to be produced in performance, “which increase and complicate meaning” (“Writing the Absent,” 156). As will be examined later, African American women playwrights and performers have established a clear and distinctive tradition that, even when preserving western patterns (such as the linear storyline format), these are usually disrupted by the inclusion of components such as music, songs, dance, prayers or simply by leaving the end of their plays open. These disruptive elements actually reverse the western traditional passive role of the audience into an active and participatory one—be it through the call and response technique, or by an open ending story that intends to

raise the audience's consciousness and make them think, react and/or bring change to their lives. Therefore, these women artists have expanded the traditional theatrical space into a new one in permanent motion that reveals new alternatives and possibilities; new sites ~~that~~ have shattered a traditional racist and sexist space by introducing and representing gender issues which welcome a different interaction with men (Barbara Smith, qtd. in Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist*, 26); and an open site ~~that~~ offers an active role to the audience re-mapping, thus, the geography of the performing arts.

Playwrights and Performers before 1950

It is significant to mention that before 1930, one hundred male and female African Americans had written three hundred fifty plays (Gray, "Discovering," 244), and only recently have these plays found inclusion in African American theatre anthologies. African American women's early plays have cast new light on North American life and culture by offering a new perspective and more integral picture of African Americans from the point of view of their women. Most of these early plays are one-act, female-centered plays that use the domestic home (a kitchen or dining room) as the main setting (in rural and urban areas) and usually as a shelter against external racism. The male figure is generally absent from the household, either because he has died, has been lynched, is working outside or has been abandoned by his wife; and if this male figure is present he is either crippled—as in Elulalie Spence's *Her* (1927)—or is countered by a wife presented as the strong figure—as in Spence's *Fool's Errand* (1927). Characters are not stereotypes and are usually black (except in the case of May Miller's white characters in *Nails and Thorns*, 1933) although the effects of white racism upon the family are present. Most of these works are either propaganda or folk plays, or a combination of both. One of the issues that most concern these playwrights and that repeats in many of their plays is lynching, either as the main theme or as backdrop of

the story. Other issues also selected by the playwrights are poverty, education, class, slavery, historical black heroes/heroines, or the black church. In all cases, though, they show how, in spite of adversity, black families survive, united, and nurtured by love in the only safe place where they can feel at ease: their home. In addition, all the plays incorporate either sacred (spirituals or gospel) or secular (folk) music that comments on the action of the play or leave the ending open for the audience to interpret it. Consequently, the style and structure of these plays are transgressive since these components disrupt the linear structure of traditional drama, broadening the possibilities of the theatrical event with the creation of new models.

After the production and success of Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* (1916), many other women continued to write protest plays, most of which specifically dealt with lynching. However, *Rachel* aroused considerable controversy among African American intellectuals and writers over whether plays should deal with propaganda or folk issues. W. E. B. Du Bois defended the propagandistic plays to raise consciousness among the black community against racism, founding the Krigwa Players. On the other hand, Professors Montgomery T. Gregory and Alain Locke of Howard University supported folk plays representing the black experience in order to reach a wider audience, and founded the Howard Players as their platform. The Howard Players actually helped African American women in their initial training and playwriting and contributed to the production of their plays in northern areas of the U.S. Likewise, Du Bois, editor of *Crisis*, and Charles S. Johnson, editor of *Opportunity*, launched literary contests for one-act plays to be published in those magazines (Perkins, *Black Female*, 4-6).⁶ Most of these early plays by African American women are available to us today because they were published in one of those premier black journals.

Referring perhaps to the tradition begun by Angelina Weld Grimké with *Rachel* (1916), Christine Gray asserts that African American women playwrights started in 1916 to become “actively engaged in writing serious plays for the non-musical stage” (Gray, “Discovering,” 244). However, the first African American playwright that we have a record of is Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins (1859-1930)—also a novelist and singer—who wrote one of the first black musical dramas that would actually bring to a close the racist ideologies and stereotypes displayed in the minstrel tradition of the eighteenth century. The minstrel show began with “Jim Crow white performers in black face mimicking black speech, music, dance and culture.”⁷ When black minstrel troupes appeared, they had to “imitate their imitators and kept the same stereotypes” that whites had created about them (Hatch & Hamilian, *Roots*, 30). However, by the year 1880, minstrelsy was disappearing. That same year Hopkins’s *Peculiar Sam, or the Underground Railroad, A Musical Drama in Four Acts* was first performed.

Peculiar Sam was produced by the author’s family company—the Hopkins Colored Troubadours—starring Hopkins’s stepfather, her mother and Pauline Hopkins herself, and the then well-known Hyers Sisters and a chorus of over sixty people. The show toured for over a year, playing from coast to coast, introducing black male and female performers who were not wearing burnt cork on their faces.⁸ The play was highly innovative at the time as it presented a group of slaves led by Sam through the Underground Railroad from a U. S. southern plantation to Canada. In addition, the play included all type of spiritual and folk songs and dance incorporating a new element to it: the call and response pattern, which changed the role of the minstrel show’s passive audience into an active one (Patterson, “Remaking the Minstrel,” 48-9). Moreover, Martha Patterson underscores that *Peculiar Sam* left aside the stock characters of minstrelsy to acknowledge “subjectivity and social mobility” (13). Patterson also observes that the male protagonist, Sam, rebels against slavery and counters the Jim Crow stereotypical jumping figure of the minstrel with that of the African American folk

trickster figure who would use the image whites expected from him to meet his needs. Sam's peculiarity, then, comes from his refusal to remain a slave (13). Caricatured black vernacular is used at the beginning, but by the end of the play, Sam and his sister Juno (who becomes a teacher) speak standard English, illustrating the patterns of the minstrel (caricatured black vernacular) and their revision (the introduction of standard English to show that blacks were perfectly capable of using it). This important linguistic component disrupted the stereotype associated by whites to the black community who, as characters, were always portrayed speaking a caricatured black dialect. The play also shows the character's black pride and reverses the tragic mulatto figure (Virginia) into affirming her black identity by marrying black Sam. By the end of the play, all the characters are dignified and respectable citizens.

If Hopkins takes the audience/reader to a journey into freedom, *Aunt Betsy's Thanksgiving* (c. 1914) by Katherine D. Chapman Tillman (1870-193?) introduces us to a poor but warm and safe black home composed of grandmother, Aunt Betsy and her twelve year old granddaughter, Ca'line. *Aunt Betsy* shows Tillman's command in using both black dialect for black characters and standard English for the only white character, a lawyer, who actually helps the family. Through Aunt Betsy, we learn that Caroline's mother, Nellie, abandoned her alcoholic and abusive husband, leaving mother and daughter behind so that she could find a job. By the end of the play, Nellie returns with a new husband (who never appears on stage), purchases the house her mother lives in, and moves to live with her, Caroline and her new husband, thus reuniting her family. Various significant issues are emphasized in this play. On the one hand, an independent woman ~~that~~ repudiates her husband for not respecting nor treating her appropriately. On the other, a strong and caring old woman who keeps struggling against poverty⁹ and whose vulnerability is symbolized by her broken leg. This vulnerable image of Aunt Betsy counters the stereotypical image of the black mammy as a powerful, strong and seemingly happy woman.¹⁰

But without question, the most significant playwright of the early twentieth century was Angelina Weld Grimké (1880-1958). Her play, *Rachel* (1916), is considered to be the first black non-musical play, written, produced and publicly performed by African Americans. *Rachel* is a four-act play that, as stated in its program, became “the first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of ten millions of Colored citizens in this free republic [the U.S.]” from a woman’s perspective (Shockley, *Afro-American Writers*, 375). Grimké attempted to reach the conscience and heart of white mothers by depicting a young girl, Rachel, who in the face of the brutal lynching her father suffered at the hands of a white mob and the continuous racism and discrimination suffered by black children on the part of white children and teachers, decides not to ever marry nor to ever have children.

Rachel was transgressive in a series of revisions and redefinitions that it presents. Rachel and her middle-class family as well as the other black characters all speak standard English rather than dialect; and the black family is depicted as self-sufficient and refined. Further, Rachel rejects traditional gender roles when she decides not to marry nor to become a biological mother. This departure from social norms “grants [Rachel] the insight to lead a rebellion by way of symbolic power” (Allen, *Peculiar Passages*, 65). However, before making the decision of never becoming a biological mother, she adopts a little child (Jimmy) when he is left alone after his parents’ death. Jimmy’s adoption by Rachel brings to front the African philosophy of an extended family where women become *othermothers*,¹¹ thus transcending the western concept of a nuclear family. Consequently, Grimké constructs a family unity whose home becomes a shelter and a healing site that counters and resists the external cruelties of racism and tightens the bonds among members of the black community. Furthermore, *Rachel* not only shaped racial discourse and stated the basis for future African American plays on this issue, but was also an attempt to build a bridge between blacks and

whites (Allen, *Peculiar Passages*, 62-3)—something that more recent playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry, Robbie McCauley or Anna D. Smith have continued to do. It is significant that *Rachel* was produced again in 1990 at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, with good audience reception (Hatch & Shine, *Black Theater U.S.A.*, 135), suggesting that seventy years after it was written, the play still tackles current social issues that concern the dynamics of North American society.

FROM THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE TO 1950

The Harlem Renaissance was a time of vast theater productions, especially thanks to the efforts of African American intellectuals such as Du Bois, Gregory and Locke, who encouraged and supported many of the plays written by the African American women of the time. Among the most prolific women playwrights were Georgia Douglas Johnson, May Miller, Eulalie Spence, Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Burrill. However, there were many other women whose plays were also significant either for their revolutionary styles—i.e., Marita Bonner and Regina M. Anderson—or for their controversial issues exposed with special mastery—i.e., Alice Dunbar Nelson and Myrtle Smith Livingston. Following the years of the Harlem Renaissance, the most outstanding figure in theatre was Shirley Graham together with two female dancers/choreographers who would open the door to other African Americans in concert dance: Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus.

Among the issues most repeated in the plays and performance creations by the African American women of these years were lynching, miscegenation and the segregated military. That lynching was one of the main themes of these plays is understandable since 3,589 blacks (including eighty-three women, several of which were white) were lynched between 1882 and 1927 (Perkins, “The Impact of Lynching,” 16).¹² In many cases the issue of lynching is combined with the black soldier's dilemma as is the case of *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918) by

Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935) and *Aftermath* (1919) by Mary P. Burril (1884-1946).

Dunbar-Nelson delivered antiwar speeches all throughout the country as well as addressed issues on women rights. In *Mine Eyes Have Seen* she depicts a family composed of two brothers (the eldest is crippled) and a sister. When the youngest brother, Chris, learns that he has been drafted to fight in World War I and remembers that their father was shot by whites for defending his home, he initiates a debate on whether his duty is to remain and take care of his family or to go to war on behalf of a nation that robs him of his dignity. Two neighbors, an Irish woman and a Jewish, join in the debate. By the end, the eldest brother and his sister beg Chris to consider love of humanity above time, race or sect, encouraging him to fight for those French mothers who must be also suffering. The end of the play shows Chris reflecting on that position and probably resigned to go to war.

Burrill's *Aftermath*, however, promotes an armed black revolution as the only solution to bring oppression and racism to a close. The play shows an old mother (Mam Sue) and her granddaughter Millie dressed in black for Millie's father's recent death by lynching while John (Millie's brother) was fighting in the war. When John returns home and learns about his father's lynching, he decides to take his pistols and find the murderers.¹³ *Aftermath* is a very powerful piece where contrasts play an important part to sustain the author's position. Thus, the play starts with Mam Sue sewing a many colors patch-work quilt (a symbol of black culture which could stand for a solid bond among their members and for their joy of life) in contrast with Mam Sue's and Millie's mourning, dressed in black (symbolizing the pain caused by white racism). In addition, another subtle contrast is posed when John, dressed in his military uniform, arrives from war and leaves his two pistols on the same spot where the Bible was seen at the beginning of the play. This move foreshadows John's final action, symbolizing that praying is not enough and action must be taken by blacks to defend themselves from injustice and racist practices such as lynching.

Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880-1966), a specialist in music—violin, piano, voice and harmony—and songwriter, also protested against lynching in many of her plays. Like Burrill in *Aftermath*, in *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925), Johnson juxtaposes the church bells and hymns that can be heard from a Sunday morning service with the lynching of a young black man—proven to be innocent of the charges he is accused—by a white mob, thus condemning white Christian hypocrisy. In other plays, such as *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (c. 1930), Johnson combines lynching and miscegenation. In this play, a mulatto young man is about to be lynched and her mother sends someone with a ring she gives him to see the governor and ask him to save her son (clearly hinting at the governor as his the father of young man), which he actually does. Miscegenation is an issue that Johnson carefully examines in *Blue Blood* (1926), showing the origins of it and possible risks run by mulattoes who fall in love, since both might be children of the same white father without being aware of it—as depicted in this play. Likewise, but in a more blatant position, Myrtle Smith Livingston (1902-1973), in her play *For Unborn Children* (1926), clearly opts against the mixing of races. The male protagonist, Leroy, is a mulatto who is about to marry a white woman in the South. When his grandmother and sister learn about this marriage, they show their strong opposition by making him think about what might happen to his *unborn children* in a racist society. The play ends with Leroy willingly going to meet the lynching mob who is searching him as a sacrifice for those *unborn children*.

Even after the Harlem Renaissance, the theme of lynching was still chosen by African American women in music and dance. In 1939, Billie Holliday made popular the poem “Strange Fruit” by white poet Lewis Allan, and in 1943, African American choreographer and dancer Pearl Primus premiered a dance composition in New York against lynching by using the same poem. Most of Primus’s dance compositions were considered protest dances, with which she intended “not to entertain but to help people better understand each other” (qtd. in

Emery, *Black Dance*, 266). A similar attempt to build a bridge of dialogue and understanding between different cultural groups could be found in another playwright of the Harlem Renaissance, May Miller (1899-1995) as presented in her play *Nails and Thorns* (1933), where she depicts a white family and the tragic effects of racism and lynching upon them—Miller was one of the few playwrights to include interracial casts in her plays. As educator, Miller was concerned about black history as well and wrote several plays on historical figures such as Haitian revolutionary Henri Christophe and African American abolitionist Harriet Tubman.¹⁴

Like protest plays, folk plays—focusing on the black experience—were also very popular. Some of the most significant were *Color Struck* (1925)—incorporating a cake-walk contest—by Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960); *Riding the Goat* (1929)—with class conflicts and conflicts between self and community's traditions and class—by May Miller; *Fool's Errand* (1927)—a humorous side of the black Church busy bodies—by Eulalie Spence (1894-1981);¹⁵ and *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: A Tragedy of Negro Life* (1930)—an extraordinary and powerful piece that shows the central role of the black church in social organization—by Regina M. Anderson (1901-1993).

Apart from the completely new perspective offered by these women's plays on the African American community, some of them introduced truly innovative staging techniques for their time. Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* (1926) is a surrealist depiction of the condition of blacks (Us) living at the bottom of the hill, and the exploitation and oppression that whites (White Devils) living at the top exert on blacks without allowing them to go up the hill. Eulalie Spence's *Her: A Mystery Play* (1927), depicts the story of an apartment haunted by the spirit of a Philippine woman who committed suicide because her husband would never allow her to have her own space. This haunting is a beautiful metaphor for a woman's need to have her own space where she can grow and develop as a free human being as well as a

metaphor for a woman's strong spirit that continues living even after death. Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck* and Regina A. Anderson's *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: A Tragedy of Negro Life*,¹⁶ two plays that use what could be called *metaperformance* since the audience can see another audience on stage watching and participating within the performance they have gone to see. Hurston's play shows several short scenes of blacks rehearsing various dances and enjoying themselves on a train heading to a cake-walk dance contest where they will participate. Besides, the audience will see the contest that would actually encourage their participation. Likewise, in Anderson's play, the audience can see a whole congregation/audience of black people in a black church (young, old, poor, middle class, groups of friends and so on) and both congregation and theatre audience will be able to participate following the call-response pattern, with their songs, applause, humming, or other sounds. Hurston and Anderson expand the stage space into the audience, establishing a new site that situates actors and audience together on the same acting space.

Following the years of the Harlem Renaissance, Shirley Graham (1896-1977), who married W. E. B. Du Bois in 1951, was the most prolific African American woman playwright. She was a feminist, theatre director and biographer, played piano and organ, sang spirituals, composed and conducted musical scores. Apart from her well-known play on mothers in slavery, *It's Morning* (1940), she also wrote *Tom-Tom: An Epic of Music and the Negro* (1932), which traces African music through the United States. An epic on the history of black's survival throughout two centuries of oppression in the New World, it was the first all-black opera to be produced on a large scale, including a professional cast of approximately five hundred actors. Graham's musical background is always present in her plays; thus, in *It's Morning*, there are spirituals and dancing or singing at the rhythm produced by slaves cutting wood with an ax. The play emphasizes the importance of music for the black community during slavery to help alleviate their burdens. The protagonist, Cissie, when learning that her

adolescent daughter has been sold to be taken to another plantation with another master, decides to take her daughter's life rather than see her suffering and being abused for being a slave. If Graham revises the cruelty of slavery and its effects upon the black mother in 1940, Grimké in *Rachel* shows that after slavery racism still had destructive effects upon young women who eschewed motherhood rather than having children who will suffer from segregation and injustice. Most of the plays of this time place the mother and/or grandmother as central figures who would do whatever necessary to protect their children and family/home from external racism and injustice against them.

Playwrights and Performers from 1950 to Present¹⁷

The process of independence initiated by various African countries during the 1950s greatly influenced the period of struggle for civil rights in the United States. Likewise, the courage of an African American woman who in 1955 refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, sparked a bus boycott that galvanized the Civil Rights Movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King and others. Moreover, this movement contributed to the birth of the Black Arts and Black Theater Movements of the 1960s, proclaiming a black aesthetic based on the African American tradition to be separate from that established by western parameters. Encouraged by both the Civil Rights and the Black Arts Movement, the 1970s would witness the rise of the Gay and Women's Liberation Movements, which would be broadened and enlightened by black feminist thought formulated by African American, Caribbean and African women writers and intellectuals.

The 1950s witnessed the birth of two great African American playwrights considered by many critics the forerunners of the Black Arts and Theatre Movements of the 1960s: Alice Childress and Lorraine Hansberry. In the 1960s, two African American women who followed the philosophy of the Black Arts/Theatre Movements were Sonia Sanchez and Barbara Ann

Teer; and another playwright, Adrienne Kennedy, introduced a new revolutionary theatrical style which, although not truly understood at the time, would become a precedent for African American women artists in the following decades. Ntozake Shange continued in the 1970s Kennedy's experimental style, incorporating black women's condemnation of sexism suffered within the black community and a declaration of their needs. Other innovative playwrights and performers of the 1970s are Alexis De Veaux, Aishah Rahman, Sybil Kein, Adrian Piper (performs in the streets and other public places), Edwina Lee Tyler (percussionist) and Bernice Johnson Reagon (founder of all-black female ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock which use African American traditional sacred and secular music and are accompanied by different musical instruments, performance and words).

The African American playwrights and performers whose works have appeared after the 1980s are the products of the previous and revolutionary decades. These women artists have continued the tradition of their ancestors with new perspectives, writing styles and performing techniques such as solo performances, dance theatre, the use of technology or experimental theatre. Among the most significant in experimental theatre are Thulani Davis, Suzan-Lori Parks, Robbie McCauley, Judith Alexa Jackson, Anna Deavere Smith, Urban Bush Women, Kia Corthron or poet/performer Sapphire. Another significant playwright of this time who considers herself a nationalist and radical feminist is Pearl Cleage. In the line of Thulani Davis and Glenda Dickerson, Cleage's plays revise and reconstruct African American women's history in a combination of classical realism and Brechtian distancing technique—the audience is taken to the past and that distance in time with their present might involve them in active and transformative thinking. A great number of these African American artists blend different skills, since many—such as Shange, McCauley or Smith—are not only writers (poets and playwrights) but also performers, dancers, actors or musicians, and at times directors and performers in their own productions. As it happened with the African

American women playwrights and performers of the 1920s and 1930s, many of these contemporary artists have collaborated with one another on different projects, maintaining thus a historical tradition of African American women's collective work.

FROM 1950 TO 1980: CIVIL RIGHTS, BLACK ARTS AND WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

Alice Childress and Lorraine Hansberry have probably been the best well-known and recognized African American playwrights during and after the 1950s. Together with the works of African American dancers/choreographers Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus,¹⁸ Childress and Hansberry provided fertile ground for the forthcoming and always transgressive and alternative artistic creations of successive African American women writers and performers. As in the 1940s, Primus had used the poem "Strange Fruit" to create a piece on lynching, in 1953 Dunham created the ballet *Southland* also inspired by the poem "Strange Fruit." In this ballet, the lynching of a man was actually dramatized on stage as it was performed in Santiago (Chile), intending to show the injustices suffered by African Americans in the U.S. and, thus, preventing "further destruction and humiliation." The State Department solicited that she removed the lynching scene, but Dunham refused by saying she would only remove it "when lynching ceased in the United States" (in Perkins, "The Impact of Lynching," 17-8). Consequently, Dunham's ballet was never staged in the U.S.

Dunham's artistry and courage in denouncing the injustices endured by African Americans were paralleled during the 1950s by Childress's and Hansberry's theatrical pieces. Alice Childress (1916-1994) mastered various skills related to the performing as an actor, playwright and theatre director, using her pen to condemn the stereotypical roles black actors were forced to play in films as well as on the stage—i.e., *Trouble in Mind* (1956, Obie Award) and *Florence* (1950). Among her many plays, there are two especially well known *The Wedding Band* (1966), which analyzes the implications and consequences of interracial

love in the South, and *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969), in which Childress depicts what it means to be black, poor and female in the U.S., exposing how sexism, racism and classism are inextricably connected while offering a revised notion of black womanhood (Brown-Guillory, *Wines*, 108). Most of Childress's plays focus on working class characters, and although written in what might be considered a realist classic style, she disrupts it by including African American traditional music, liturgy of black church, folk and fantasy elements as well as African mythology. It is also significant that Childress has been the only African American woman playwright whose plays have been written, published and produced for four consecutive decades.

A Raisin in the Sun (1959) made Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965) the first African American woman to reach Broadway and the first African American playwright to win the New York Critics Circle Award. Hansberry wrote her play mindful of the historical and revolutionary times of the Civil Rights, since Lena, the mother and head of the black family in the play, decides to move out of a ghetto in order to find a better place/home that meets the needs of her family that only seems available within the range of white neighborhoods. In her play, Hansberry continues Childress's line in eradicating black stereotypical characters by presenting a family who symbolizes the black community and the many different points of view and personalities that can be found in it. In addition, Hansberry's plays show her concern about race relations, as she demonstrated in *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1965), believing that dialogue between blacks and whites was necessary. However, by the end of her life she was convinced that words were insufficient, and action was also needed to achieve African Americans' rights, as presented in her unfinished piece *Les Blancs* (produced in 1970). Although *Les Blancs* takes place in Africa, Hansberry clearly distances the story to make her audience think about what should be done in their own country. Like previous black women playwrights in the U. S., she revised and reconstructed different black historical

periods and heroes in her writing, such as slavery (*The Drinking Gourd*, 1061), or historical black leaders such as Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Overture (*Toussaint: a Work in Progress*, 1961).

Childress's and Hansberry's stories are usually presented in a linear form, and their themes are socially oriented, maintaining their concern for the African American community as the backdrop of their theatrical creations. On the contrary, the pieces written by Adrienne Kennedy (1931-) are built upon a more experimental style and focus on the psychological states of mind of her characters. Kennedy opened a new door for African American theatre by building a completely new theatrical site on which she valiantly dared to expose the terrible pain of her black characters split between the black and white worlds. Abandoning any possible closeness to traditional realism, she opted for a symbolic style more appropriate to expose her characters' states of mind. This is the case of Sarah's internal struggle in her play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964, Obie Award). *Funnyhouse* depicts Sarah's confusion and pain for being unable to find her right place, so she creates her own rooms filled with icons from the western culture and vivid images inspired by the African masks Kennedy saw during a trip to Congo while writing this play. Mulatto Sarah stands as a symbol for the battleground on which blacks and whites are unable to reconcile, and incapable of bearing the pain, Sarah decides to commit suicide. Kennedy uses her own dreams (actually nightmares) to show the destructive effects caused by a racist society in a surrealistic/expressionistic style and in a very powerful and poetic language. *Funnyhouse* was produced at the time of the Black Arts Movement that promoted black pride, but the play was considered outside the parameters defended by black intellectuals—the play show the agonic struggle of a mulatto woman who, split and unable to survive between the white and black worlds, is driven to suicide .

However, no other African American writer of that time was as daring as Kennedy to depict and voice the individual internal pain suffered by many blacks. Kennedy's exorcism of pain

would actually facilitate other African American women playwrights and performers to follow her example. These playwrights, such as Sonia Sanchez and Ntozake Shange, would start not only expressing their pain but also their rage and their needs as women.

Sonia Sanchez (1934-), one of the few women considered part of the Black Arts and Theater Movement, was mainly a poet who used to read her poetry during the 1960s. Like Kennedy, she turned away from classical realism and used her poetry to create theatre, giving birth to *poemplays* written in a very visual language. But in contrast to Kennedy's plays, ~~those~~ of Sanchez's plays were written in consonance with the aesthetic pursued by the artists of the Black Arts Movement as reflected in her one-woman monologue *Sister Son/ji* (1969). Presented in a surrealistic style, the play shows a 55 woman's struggle that stands as a metaphor for that of African Americans throughout history in the U.S. and, according to Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, is "one of the most significant portrayals of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s" (*Wines*, 154). Moreover, Sanchez also uses the stage to address black men and ask them to respect black women, as presented in *The Bronx Is Next* (1968).

Likewise, following the philosophy of the Black Arts and Theatre Movements, in 1968 Barbara Ann Teer abandoned commercial theatre and opened an alternative and transformative space for black theatre within the African American community by founding the National Black Theater of Harlem. Teer proposed a ritual form for her theatrical creations since ritual can be considered collective and participatory. Teer chose Harlem for she saw "the transformative potential of Harlem as well as a need for new patterns and innovative rituals" (Lewis, "Ritual Reformulations," 72). And not satisfied with that, years later she erected a circular theatre playhouse to become the physical evidence of her philosophy in favor of ritual, a collaborative theatrical form that opened space for the audience as part of their productions (an endeavor already begun by other black women playwrights during the Harlem Renaissance). Most of Teer's theatrical pieces have originated out of collective

work—this is the case of their work on Gwendolyn Brook's poem "We Real Cool"—and almost always combine dance, music and drama. Teer explains that spirituals are among the musical pieces she usually includes in her performances because "they feed the spirit" of people (Malpede, "Barbara Ann Teer," 229) as proven throughout African American history.

By dissecting the mind of her characters, Kennedy had begun a process of individual healing that was continued and extended by Sanchez and Teer to the black community. Ntozake Shange (1948-), on the other hand, focused specifically on black women whose healing required breaking the silence of past generations and giving voice to their rage and their womanly needs. Her internationally acclaimed play, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), transforms the stage into a healing site for seven women who tell the audience the painful experiences that actually took them to the point of considering suicide. If, in Kennedy's *Funnyhouse*, Sarah's loneliness leads her to suicide, in Shange's play, women find the courage to exorcise their pain thanks to their strong bond—this piece was also created collectively. It is that emotional bond that helps these seven women break their silence, abandon their lack of self-esteem and reach the point in which celebrate divinity within themselves ("i found god in myself & i loved her/i loved her fiercely" (Shane, *for colored girs*, 67). That emotional bond is paralleled by an emotional language composed of poetry, music and dance presented on a bare stage filled with the rainbow colors of these women's outfit. Apart from having pioneered "black feminist thought-in-action to theatre" (Mahone, "Introduction," xxv), Shange introduced a new theatrical technique: the *choreopoem*. She incorporated her writing and performing skills (as poet, novelist and dancer) into the stage, following the trend already established by Kennedy and broadening the possibilities of finding new transformative sites for black women and theatre.

If dance and music are integral components of Shange's *choreopoems*, music is an essential element in the plays by Aishah Rahman as part of what the playwright calls *jazz aesthetic*. Rahman's *jazz aesthetic* shows the various levels of characters' reality: the unborn, the living and the dead while it intends to express in drama "multiple ideas and experiences through language, movement, visual art and spirituality simultaneously" (in Mahone, *Moon Marked*, 284). Simultaneity is essential in her play *Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage* (1977), in which she juxtaposes a woman's screams while giving birth with a note blown by Charlie Parker (Bird), the birth of a new child while Bird dies in a gilded cage. *Unfinished women*, symbolizing the live music on stage, is staged on split space¹⁹ to depict on one side pregnant teenagers on contemplating whether to give their children for adoption, and, on the other, Bird's last days of life. Presenting a combination of styles, including avant-garde, absurd, surrealism, farce, satire and ritual, Rahman has also written a musical tragedy, *Lady Day* (1972) on Billie Holiday, and *The Mojo and the Sayso* (1989)—based on the tragic shooting by the police of a ten-year old child. As her ancestors sought to do, Rahman widened the range of possibilities for the stage space.

FROM 1980 TO PRESENT: AN EXTENDED FAMILY OF WOMEN

Since the 1980s, not only have African American women continued the path of re-mapping the geography of the stage, but they have also sought new spots that are an extension of that space. They have shown that the stage is a space that always remains in motion. A great number of works by contemporary African American playwrights can be included within the category of experimental theatre/performance, such as Robbie McCauley's creations. McCauley is especially well-known for her play *Sally's Rape* (1989, Obie Award) that connects the past of slavery with present history and tries to create a bridge between races through the two—black and white—actors on stage, while including the audience as the third

actor of the show. Judith Alexa Jackson has created another experimental piece entitled the “high-tech of Anita Hill” (Mahone, *Moon Marked*, 146), *WOMBmanWars* (1992). Both McCauley and Jackson are writers and performers, and they use different technological devices, such as video cameras, slides and microphones for actors and for the audience. Lisa Jones also uses technology in her plays, as in *Combination Skin* (1986), a deconstructive exploration of the tragic mulatto theme to the rhythm of a television contest show in order to find *a place* for mulatto women. On the other hand, Thulani Davis has excelled in musical opera with *The Life of Malcolm X* (1985), written to be sung using the rhythms of Malcolm X’s speeches that, according to the author, sound similar to jazz. Sapphire (Ramona Lofton), dancer, writer and poet, performs her autobiographical poetry that shows the cruel legacy of child abuse as well as demands new places for women’s sexuality and the transgender movement. Kia Corthron, on the other hand, is one of the few playwrights to have written on black mothers in jail, i.e. her play *Cage Rhythm* (1993). And, finally, the dance theatre group founded by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar in 1984, Urban Bush Women, who have especially focused on the body of the black woman as a site of restoration and a source of strength. They have especially concentrated on healing the raped body. Moreover, through dance—as in their piece *Batty Moves* (1995)—they have tried to recuperate and to emphasize black women’s hip movement so characteristic of black Caribbean rhythms as an expression of sensuality and spirituality (WAC).

Out the tapestry of African American playwrights after the 1980s, three of them have received special acclaim: Suzan-Lori Parks, Anna Deavere Smith and Pearl Cleage. Parks and Smith could be included within the category of experimental theatre whereas Cleage’s plays present a more linear storyline. Although clearly influenced by Adrienne Kennedy’s style and imagery and Ntozake Shange’s deconstruction of the English language, Suzan-Lori Parks takes this experimental trend to a higher extreme. The title of her plays already give a hint of

her use of language: *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990, or *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1990, Obie Award). In Parks's plays, language becomes subject and theme (Berney, "Suzan-Lori Parks," 190), "a physical act. Something that happens in your entire body . . . Words are things that move our bodies." Parks's creations intend to challenge both the actor's and the audience's imagination (in Mahone, *Moon Marked*, 242). Her plays also show how people are fixed in a specific place by a language that has been imposed on them and seek to free themselves from the "weight of words" (Berney, "Suzan-Lori Parks," 188). In addition, Parks examines history for she is concerned about the *holes*, the absences of black people in history. According to Liz Diamond, who has directed most of Parks's plays in close connection with Parks, Parks's plays contain two stories, reminiscent of jazz, suggesting that her plays be read as musical scores (Drukman, "Doo-a-Diddly-Dit-Dit," 284, 297, 298). Furthermore, Parks explains the "rep" and "rev" strategy used in her work, the repetition and revision of history that can be seen in *The American Play* (1993), where characters and historical events happen first as tragedy, second as farce, and then as theatre of the absurd. This "rep" and "rev" strategy, Parks states, "keeps the spectator/reader ever-vigilant, looking for something missed in the last repetition while scrutinizing the upcoming revision." Her plays depict the world as a complex and multidimensional place (in Drukman, "Doo-a-Diddly-Dit-Dit," 285, 294).

Anna Deavere Smith's experimental pieces are solo performances in which many different characters are impersonated by her. The mastery of her acting is essential in the production of her shows.²⁰ Different characters are interviewed by Smith on a specific and controversial issue. When the audience listens to each character's point of view, multiple versions of truth, they realize the unresolvable contradictions found within them (Martin, "The Word Becomes You," 267). Two of her most acclaimed pieces won an Obie Award, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities* (1992) and *Twilight: Los*

Angeles 1992 (1993). Sydné Mahone emphasizes that Smith's performances foreground the "power of oral tradition" and the "power of the solo artist to become the voice of the people" ("Introduction," xxxi). Smith explains the title of *Fires in the Mirror*: "The fire images in the title of the show represent many small, dormant fires of social unrest, which can flare up as a result of high-speed friction. The mirror is the stage, reflecting the fires back to us" (Hatch and Shine, *Black Theatre*, Vol. II, 492). Regarding *Twilight*, Smith states it is "a call to the community . . . I wanted to be part of their examination of the problems. I believe that solutions of these problems will call for the participation of large and eclectic groups of people." She also believes that in the United States people have reached a stage where silence must be broken about race, and many people should be encouraged to participate in the dialogue (Perkins and Uno, *Contemporary Plays*, 280). Smith, then, places herself on the same side as Robbie McCauley, who also believes in the need of the audience's participation in a dialogue on racial issues.

If Smith's works pose a special emphasis on performance, those of Pearl Cleage underline the power of the written word and story line to be told. Cleage considers herself a black nationalist and radical feminist who is determined to continue in the struggle "against racism, sexism, classism and homophobia" (Perkins and Uno, *Contemporary Plays*, 46). Her determination is especially manifest in her play *Flyin' West* (1992),²¹ a new perspective of the history of the U.S. west from a black woman's point of view, that shows a group of late nineteenth-century black women controlling their own lives. This play was inspired by a note Ida B. Wells published in a Memphis newspaper during the 1890s, after a lynching and a riot. Wells encouraged African Americans to leave their homes in the South and move to the west in search of freedom and new land. The protagonists of this piece are three sisters and Ms. Leah, an old woman who was born into slavery. Cleage, then, creates a womanist space where there is no room for intruders who might want to abuse them and break the women's achieved

harmony. The older sister Sophie always carries her rifle, and when she is ready to kill her younger sister Minnie's abusive husband, Ms. Leah counsels her about a better method slave women used kill abusive masters and that would prevent her from going to jail. It is Ms Leah, then, who will help to finish with the abusive intruder's life by preparing a pie with her *special* secret recipe. Interesting enough, soon after the death of Minnie's husband, Minnie gives birth to a little baby girl who will continue strengthening and broadening that womanist tradition already established in her home. Cleage builds a special female-centered site in *Flyin' West* through which she redefines the concept of family and kinship. Cleage offers the image of an extended family of women that actually create a home where they can feel free and safe, and where they can grow and love each other without hierarchies. Cleage asserts that with her plays she offers analysis, establishes a context and clarifies a point of view intended to incite her audience or readers to action (Perkins and Uno, *Contemporary Plays*, 46). Continuing the circle of womanist spaces created by African American women performance artists, *Flyin' West* is a vital link in the performative circle where contemporary African American performance artists look to the past for inspiration as they construct new womanist sites for the present and for the future.

¹ James V. Hatch and Ted Shine (eds.), *Black Theatre U.S.A. Plays by African Americans* (1974); James V. Hatch and Ted Shine (eds.), *Black Theatre U.S.A. Plays by African Americans Volume I, "The Early Period, 1847-938"* (1998); James Hatch and Leo Hamalian (eds.), *The Roots of African American Drama: An Anthology of Early Plays* (1991) and *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance 1920-1940* (1996); Kathy Perkins (ed.), *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950* (1989) and *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women* (1998); Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, *Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (1990).

² Frederick Douglass actually participated as one of the orators in the 1848 Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York, in defense of women rights. African American writer and philosopher W. E. B. DuBois equally continued on the same line fighting for women's suffrage throughout the twentieth century.

³ There has always been collaboration, friendship, encouragement and support among African American women throughout their history whether in the creation/production of their works, in organizing to protest and help runaways or against lynching (Stephens, "The Harlem Renaissance," 100). Among the women of the 1920s, Georgia D. Johnson encouraged Marita Bonner (also a friend of Zora Neale Hurston) to try playwriting. May Miller was also a friend of Johnson, a close friend of Hurston and a student of Mary Burrill. Shirley Graham met Miller. Likewise, examples of collaborative work are found after the 1970s and 1980s. Robbie McCauley and Laurie Carlos have performed two of the roles of Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide*; Carlos and percussionist Edwina Lee Tyler have collaborated with the theatre dance company Urban Bush Women; and Carlos and McCauley have also worked together in various projects.

⁴ Representative examples of contemporary African American performers using technological devices on stage are Robbie McCauley and Judith Alexa Jackson, who introduces slides, film, video or microphones.

⁵ Even though most African American playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance, aware of the obstacles they would find to have their plays produced, would write under the title of their play "a play to be read", the activity of reading it aloud also implied telling that story to other people, as did storytellers, activity that equally implied a performance for an audience.

⁶ In 1925 there were 628 manuscripts submitted to *Crisis* and 738 to *Opportunity*, most of them written by women as were mostly women who won those contests. These women playwrights obtained two out of the three *Crisis* distinctions for 1925: Myrtle Smith

Libingston's *For Unborn Children* and Ruth Gaines-Shelton's *The Church Fight*. In 1926, Eulalie Spence obtained one of the two awards for her play *The Purple Flower*. Similarly, in *Opportunity* in 1925 playwrights Zora Neale Hurst for *Colorstruck* and *Spears*, and May Miller for *Blue Blood*, were among the winners. In 1927 Eulalie Spence obtained recognition for two of her plays, *The Starter* and *The Hunch*, and Georgia Johnson for *Plumes* (Perkins, *Black Female*, 6).

⁷ Jim Crow is a stereotyped black dancing character whose name would be adopted to signify racist and segregationist laws against African Americans.

⁸ This step was quite revolutionary at the time since in the past using burnt cork on their faces had been instituted by whites who mimicked blacks in their performance and black actors had continued the same custom in minstrelsy.

⁹ Another play that focuses more blatantly on blacks and poverty is Mary Burrill's *The That Sit in Darkness* (1925). This play condemns the laws that forbade to give information on birth control methods to the African American community.

¹⁰ For further information on the representation of old women countering the mammy stereotype, see Trudier Harris, "Before the Strength, the Pain," in Marh-Lockett, *Black Women Playwrights*, 1999.

¹¹ For further information on *othermothering* see Stanlie James, "Mothering," in James and Busia, eds., *Theorizing Black Feminisms*, 1994.

¹² Perkins wonders why no woman playwright of the time ever dealt with the lynching of other women, while she mentions different women artists (sculptors and painters, among others) who actually chose the lynching of black women as the central issue of their works.

¹³ Like Burrill, Marita Bonner (1898-1971) too supported an armed revolution in *The Purple Flower* (1926), a one-act surrealistic composition on the condition of blacks (Us) under white (the White Devils) subjugation.

¹⁴ Miller was the most widely published African American playwright during the Harlem Renaissance as well as one of the best exponents of black women who struggled to write, direct, perform and produce quality shows. Miller also taught speech, dance and drama.

¹⁵ Eulalie Spence, who considered theatre as a place for entertainment and not for propaganda or other serious issues, was one of the very few African American women playwrights who ventured the genre of comedy. Other two more recent playwrights and/or performers on the same genre of comedy are Sybil Kein and Danitra Vance.

¹⁶ Anderson's *Climbing Jacob's* was one of the earliest lynching plays by an African American woman to be produced by the Harlem Experimental Theatre in 1931.

¹⁷ For an annotated bibliography on contemporary African American Playwrights, see Dana A. Williams, *Contemporary African American Female Playwrights* (Greenwood Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Other African American women who have excelled either in dance or opera ballet after the 1950s are Katherine Flowers, Debra Austin (the first to offer her audience in a concert program material available on African American dance), Carmen de Lavallade, Mary Hinkson, and Janet Collins (ballet opera).

¹⁹ The stage was also divided in two parts (but horizontally), in Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* (1926). Likewise, Sybil Kein's comedy *Get Together* (1970) divides the stage into two to see a black family and a white family simultaneously, so that both blacks and whites can see and laugh at the stereotypes they have created about each other.

²⁰ Richard Schechner has underscored Smith's acting techniques: "Her way of working is less like that of a conventional Euro-American actor and more like that of African, Native American, and Asian ritual. Smith works by means of deep mimesis, a process opposite of that of 'pretend'" (in Perkins and Uno, *Contemporary Plays*, 265)

²¹ Other plays by Cleage are *Late Bus to Mecca* (1993), *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (1995) and *Bourbon at the Border* (1997).

