

Paul Carter Harrison

Praise/Word

I stand myself and my art squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters, and find the ground to be hallowed and made fertile by the blood and bones of the men and women who can be described as warriors on the cultural battlefield that affirmed their self-worth. As there is no idea that cannot be contained by black life, these men and women found themselves to be sufficient and secure in their art and their instructions.

—August Wilson (1996)

In 1996 Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson dropped the gauntlet on skepticism about the validity of Black Theatre. His keynote address, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” delivered at the eleventh Biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference at Princeton University, became the occasion for Wilson to remind us that the term “black or African-American not only denotes race, it denotes condition, and carries with it the vestige of slavery and the social segregation and abuse of opportunity so vivid in our memory.” And because of the unrelieved “abuse of opportunity and truncation of possibility,” it becomes imperative to alter perceptions of self by jettisoning the aesthetic models of Western tradition that have forged such perceptions of blackness. These models must be replaced by the “spiritual temperament” of the ancestors whose songs, dances, and art were a manifest act of the “creator from whom life flowed,” thereby placing the craftsman at the “spiritual center of his existence.”

Wilson’s declaration could easily be misconstrued as a mere reaction to oppression, when in fact it is a testamental reflection on the goal of contemporary Black Theatre artists to identify and retrieve African traditions from the American social landscape. In the process, a self-validating African moral universe would be reconstructed that would lead to the achievement of the “spiritual center” necessary for a reappraisal of black humanity.

While the black experience in America and throughout the African Diaspora is not monolithic but exhibits a wide range of class and regional diversity, there is sufficient

commonality of collective response to African retention to construct a culturally specific mythos that reveals ethnic authenticity, if not ethnic purity. Such a collective response may very well be consistent with Northrop Frye's observation that when "a mythology is formed, a *temenos* or magic circle is drawn around a culture, and literature develops historically within a limited orbit of language, reference, allusion, beliefs, transmitted and shared tradition" (Frye: 268–342). Lucius T. Outlaw reminds us that in order to preserve the integrity of black culture and rescue our minds and hearts from the corrosive effects of self-deprecation, "a transformation of consciousness" is required. The new consciousness is achieved through a process of "symbolic reversal" that offers an opportunity to reassess, valorize, and codify experience in accord with values gleaned from the culturally specific traditions of black experience. *Symbolic reversal* implies a code-switching that permits us to engage experience "on the level of symbolic meaning" so as to disentangle the assumptions projected by dominant culture about the process of black social life and to claim authority over the existence of its authenticity (Outlaw: 403–4).

Symbolic reversal of social and sacred codes is vital for the "transformation of consciousness" needed to overcome the negative connotations of *blackness* constructed in Western consciousness for more than 2000 years. *Black* and *White* are symbolized in Judeo-Christian mythologies as polarities of darkness and light in eternal struggle; they have thus become *racialized* signifiers in contemporary Western language. Such mythologies deified white skin as light and dark skin as darkness. Yet we discover that in African mythology *blackness* provides an alternative origin and symbolic representation in the universe. In his study of African myths, for example, Clyde W. Ford recognizes in the Egyptian myth of Nut, the sky goddess, the movement from light toward dark as the necessary initiation of the procreative passage of sunlight through the underworld, where seeds are planted in the fertile darkness of dream time before the sun reappears in its divine nature to complete a cycle of death and renewal. "Black people" are seen as "people of the setting sun; people of the dream time; people of the seeded earth; people of the fertile womb; people on the underground journey toward God-realization; people of immeasurable radiance; people of infinite compassion" (Ford: 6–11). A mythology that assigns to *blackness* the symbolic movement of the setting sun that carries human consciousness into dream and the realm of the unconscious before reappearing is a procreative symbol of renewal and transformation, and offers a productive ideogram which can be found in the ontological systems of most African cultures.

As evinced in the aesthetics of Hip Hop culture, *symbolic reversal* has shaped the encoded language of a vernacular oral tradition that has proven to be the reliable agency for the continuance and re-absorption of African myths framed by the new context of experience. In his twentieth-century cycle of plays, August Wilson has immortalized the Hill District of Pittsburgh by identifying it as the spiritual location of myths that reconstruct mundane experience into mysteries of life that reveal signs for self/collective affirmation in the midst of chaos. In George C. Wolfe's *Colored Mu-*

seum, the use of *symbolic reversal* in contemporary Black Theatre is commonly used as an artistic/rhetorical strategy both to confront the stereotypic demons that haunt consciousness and to reinvest formerly negative stereotypes with character traits that might valorize them as significant icons in a newly constructed mythology of the black experience. Rather than adhere to the “keep ‘em laughin’” survival strategy of Jasper and Sambo Coon, the iconic jesters of American entertainment, Robert Alexander infused Uncle Tom, the symbol of passive resistance, with a new meaning in *I Ain't Yo' Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Matt Robinson reveals the trickster pedigree of the Signifyin' Monkey as the master of improvisation in *The Confessions of Stepin Fetchit* (Euell: 667–675). And in Marsha Leslie's *The Trial of One Short-Sighted Black Woman vs. Mammy Louise and Safreeta Mae*, code-reversal has made it possible to rescue and reinvent the Mammy stereotype as a warrior/mythic-hero archetype.

Parenthetically, the need to recover *Mammy* as a mythic reference to the Great Mother of Creation in African mythology reflects a current trend to bring forth the voices of the African goddesses that have been submerged through the paternalistic hegemony of Christian dogma. While the reclamation of Africa as a central iconographic source has provided symbolic fortification for African diasporic cultures in general, it has served greatly to reify the black female image in particular. The Great Mother, iconically symbolized in a sanctified universe with the regenerative powers of procreation, is often represented as rock or sacred stone, projecting the image of the strong black woman who is venerated (as in *Sweet Honey in the Rock*) for the archetypal qualities more often associated with male strength, power, and creative force. The African female principle shares none of the angst of Western feminists forced to the margins of social organization. Instead, African diasporic women are best represented by the image of Osun, who in Yoruba mythology resides at the core, rather than the periphery, of social order (Davies; Bádéjò). This is also apparent in the male/female dual qualities of Obatala in Yoruba mythology, Dambala and Ayida in Vodum, and the non-gender-specific potency of Harriet Tubman, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Winnie Mandela. And then there is Sycorax, the magical source of nature created in the margins of Shakespeare's mind in *The Tempest*, making a modest reappearance in Aimé Césaire's adaptation, *A Tempest*, through the voice of her nature-offspring, Caliban. May Joseph, writing in Part II of this volume, awakens us to the need for a Sycorax-like voice to reconstruct values that are spiritually liberating for black women shouldering the burden of being both mothers and fathers in absent-male households.

At this juncture of contemporary African consciousness, which recognizes *blackness* as a quality of sensibility and not a reaction to *whiteness*, Larry Neal's 1968 black arts movement manifesto, instructing black artists to replace the Western aesthetic tradition with a separate symbolism, mythology, iconology, and critique generated by the specific continuity of African cultural traditions, becomes a significant mandate. Houston A. Baker has observed,

The guiding assumption of the Black Arts Movement was that if a literary-critical investigator looked to the characteristic musical and verbal forms of the masses, he could discover unique aspects of Afro-American creative expression— aspects of both form and performance—that lay closest to the verifiable emotional referents and experiential categories of Afro-American culture. The result of such critical investigations . . . would be the discovery of a “Black aesthetic”— a distinctive code for the creation and evaluation of black art. (Baker: 74)

Neal’s edict echoes Alain Locke’s challenge to artists of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, when he urged that black dramatic art must be liberated not only from external disparagement but from its self-imposed limitations by breaking away from established dramatic conventions to develop its own. Though emerging from a context of oppression, the ideal expressive products of Black Theatre throughout the Diaspora should reflect an alternative style of work or practice that is culturally specific and not limited to Western dramaturgical conventions. The new work must aspire beyond the documentary replication of experience that is reduced to convenient racial tags such as Negro or Colored or Aboriginal or Other, which relegates such performance practices to an insular, *ghettoized* theatrical experience.

Perhaps a distinction should be made between those performance exercises represented by anecdotal *dramas* that review the *slings and arrows of outrageous (racial) fortune* in black domestic life, and *theatre* as the ritual reenactment of black experience. Certainly there has always been and will undoubtedly continue to be something called African American drama—including popular entertainments such as revues and urban circuit musicals, melodramas and stock comedies that parody the black experience, as well as socio-historical docudramas and biographies constructed in the usual linear convention of social realism that hold black performance hostage to crude, reductive imitations of life that reliably adhere to the descriptive interpretation of sociological facts. And irrespective of its recurring popularity in the repertoires of American theatre, the exoticized *Porgy and Bess* remains an offensive portrayal of black life; equally unflattering was the cork-faced rendering of *Mammy* by one of the icons of American musical theatre, Al Jolson, which was merely a vulgarization of black performance. Consequently, it should be evident that the mere presence of black actors on a stage, including the novelty of a nontraditional all-black cast performing European classics such as *The Cherry Orchard*, does not constitute Black Theatre.

Clearly the dehumanizing oppression and resulting dysfunctional pathologies suffered by Africans in the Diaspora over the past five hundred years, as a result of the barbaric slave trade and colonialism, constitute the most indescribable holocaust in human history. Its dimensions cannot be assessed through isolated, episodic narratives of victimization. Without an enduring epiphany, personal litanies of victimization can only solicit provisional sympathy. The challenge of contemporary Black Theatre is to formulate a specific practice that can contextualize African-inspired values and overcome the trauma of dislocation and subjugation. Black Theatre must generate a transformative ritual style of work informed by the expressive strategies located

in the continuum of African memory throughout the Diaspora. At its expressive core is a spiritual connection between shadow and light, ancestors and the living. Most importantly, whatever value it might have as entertainment, the inventive process of Black Theatre must illuminate the collective ethos of the black experience in a manner that binds, cleanses, and heals.

The intention of this collection of essays is to demonstrate that Black Theatre is not merely the social inscription of victimization arrested in the lens of social realism. Rather, it is the rhythmic spectacle of language, movement, and sound rooted deeply in the social negotiations of church, Carnival, and the call-and-response practices of collective experience. Common to the language styles of Black Theatre in the Diaspora is a virtuoso performance with a certain musicality of tone and pitch that promotes onomatopoeic insinuations for semantic effect. The spiritually invocative process is designed to minimize naturalistic character traits in order to collapse, as W. E. Abrams observes of the Akan oral tradition, *realism* into the supra-universe of myth that reveals the form of things unknown.

In *The Mind of Africa*, Abrams observes a similar tendency in the Akan literature, in which character types or archetypes are favored over well-rounded characterizations. Abrams explains this as a result of the individual's relationship both to a society "comprising individuals with antecedent duties and responsibilities" and to the spiritual world. As a result, "the three-dimensional individual, completely subsistent, and a distinct atom, was non-existent" (Abrams: 97). Similarly, it is not uncommon to discover in the ritual forms of Black Theatre characters that are more representative archetypes than individuated, full-dimensional characters located in the conventions of realism. Characters configured as archetypes serve a universe that allows both the living and the dead to drive the actions of a dramatic event. Although Western traditions have been moving "from a metaphysical apprehension of the world to a naturalistic one" guided by empirical calculation, the worldview of most African cultures includes both the living and the dead, and relies on storytelling that unfolds as "reproductive verisimilitude" as opposed to "descriptive realism" (Abrams: 92-97). It may be useful here to use Abrams's observations on the "reproductive verisimilitude" of African art as an analogy for the objectives of Black Theatre in the Diaspora:

Traditional African art was not literary or descriptive, employing conventional devices for effects like a kind of code-language. It was direct, magical, attempting a sort of plastic analogue of onomatopoeia, to evince and to evoke feelings which the subjects induced in one. . . . The superlative achievement of African art probably lies in the control achieved over deformity and its associated feelings in their societies. Thus in the relevant works, there is a near-vigour, but not vigour *a la Japan*, near-hideousness but not hideousness, near-distortion which is not complete, the complex of attributes which does not quite scarify, but leaves a ponderous aura of dark forces, of massive unreleased potency, of the unknown and the indeterminate, almost a hushed version of the ventriloquist ubiquity of the rattle-snake, the sense of mesmerized helplessness, still, cold, silent, enchantedly for-

lorn, and an aura of the numinous presence of primeval spirit. African art was testimonial, except when it was secular. (Abrams: 112)

It is precisely the magic “aura of dark forces . . . the unknown and indeterminate . . . the numinous presence of primeval spirit” that Black Theatre pursues in its testimonial rituals. Such a pursuit was anathema to Richard Wright, the author of the Marxist novel *Native Son*, who preferred the concreteness of realism to the metaphysical literary objectives of some of his peers, which he repudiated as the search for the form of things unknown.

Perhaps the defining moment of change at the crossroads between realism and the ritual form of things unknown came with the reception to Lorraine Hansberry’s critically acclaimed *A Raisin In the Sun*, which played on Broadway in 1959 and altered the cultural landscape of the Great White Way for the next four decades. While it appears to be a black domestic drama framed by the conventions of Marxist-style realism, this play reveals many aesthetic qualities associated with an African consciousness. The most salient of these is the active *trickster* presence of the dead father at the crossroads of domestic indecision, not as a ghost but rather as a spirit force that drives the actions of the play (see Femi Euba, in Part II of this volume, on the African trickster). Hansberry’s play appeared in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement, a time of urgency that demanded new forms to carry messages of social change. Recognizing that the highest expectation of art is that it transform the mundane, ritual mechanisms were constructed to probe the recesses of African memory, penetrating fixed relationships of material reality to bear witness to the spiritual essence of familiar experience. As a performance practice, Black Theatre abandoned documentary expositions of black life and moved away from “drama—the spectacle observed,” as Kimberly W. Benston has noted, “to ritual—the event which dissolves traditional divisions between actor and spectator, between self and other” (Benston: 62). Ritual gestures, once subordinated by dominant culture, were retrieved from the vernacular rhythms of traditional folk life to illuminate the culturally specific aspects of social experience that reaffirmed the presence of a durable human spirit struggling to overcome the conditions of oppression and dignify existence. The new aesthetic vision awakened the African American consciousness to a self-definition shared with other African diasporic cultures, thereby solidifying the need for a global consciousness that recognized the collective experience and the shared impact of Eurocentric colonization on cultural practice.

The earliest signs of departure from the convention of realism to and its replacement by ritual were discerned in the mytho-absurdist inventions of Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and LeRoi Jones’s (Amiri Baraka’s) *Dutchman*, both prompting the emergence of a Black Theatre movement with its own expressive voice. The movement had gained substantial momentum and currency through the mounting in 1965 of Douglas Turner Ward’s *Day of Absence*, performed by a black cast in white-face, a satirical inversion of the American minstrel format that revealed the subtle interdependence between blacks and whites. The production became the cata-

lyst for the formation of the Negro Ensemble Company in 1967, which for the next twenty-five years produced and nurtured the widest repertory of black works in the world (the only exception being the prodigious repertory of work produced since 1969 by Woodie King, Jr. at the New Federal Theatre). Contributing to the new wave was Ed Bullins's 1968 absurd-realist play, *The Electronic Nigger*, which paved the way for the short-lived New Lafayette Theatre in Harlem, at which Bullins and Richard Wesley (*Black Terror*) were principal writers and collaborated with director Bob Macbeth, who was committed to the development of ritual theatre. As Bullins put it, "We don't want to have a higher form of white art in Black faces. . . . [We] are working toward something entirely different and new that encompasses the soul and spirit of Black people, and that represents the whole experience of our being here in this oppressive land" (Marvin X: xii). Also in Harlem during this period was the National Black Theatre, under the spiritual and artistic guidance of Barbara Ann Teer, who abandoned Western dramatic structures and aggressively promoted black church performance techniques inspired by Yoruba rituals (see Lundeana M. Thomas on Teer in Part IV of this volume). As the movement evolved, it developed a performance practice that framed the folk traditions of urban and rural black life with conventional plot structures, yet revealed an invocative, testimonial language of voice and gesture to drive actions into a kinetic, seamless weave of non-linear storytelling. In the process, a relationship between spiritual and mundane reality was encouraged through a coalescence of time and place that validated the social and moral landscape and provided immediate symbolic significance and utility for ideograms gleaned in an integrated social universe. Finally, the movement is a practice that demands choreographic action on the scale of a spectacle—which can be achieved by a single performer—to accommodate the kaleidoscopic character of African memory.

It soon became clear that the objectives of the new practice required a method of systematic analysis beyond the constraints of both the Western aesthetic paradigm and the social conditions from which such creative exigency emerged. As Wole Soyinka has astutely observed, a critical discourse requires an understanding of the cultural syntax of a people. "When you go into any culture, I don't care what the culture is . . . you have to understand the language, by that I don't mean what we speak, you've got to understand the interior language of the people, you've got to speak . . . the metalanguage of the people." Until recently, scholars, critics, and practitioners of theatre have regarded black presence in a stage play merely as a vector for the exploration of social conscience, a dramatic construction without a verifiable, culturally specific worldview. We have not always been responsive to the arc or pattern of symbolic expression rooted in the collective ethos of the African continuum, captured in such terms as August Wilson's "blood memory" and Caribbean poet Aimé Césaire's "plasmatic dimension," which shapes existence with the "accumulated, inherited experiences buried in the collective memory and unconscious of people of African descent." We failed to detect the collective sensibility made possible through the arousal of a shared sense of spirituality located in language, religion, food, celebration and ceremonial rituals, music, and dance (see Keith Walker on Césaire in Part II of this

volume). In order to make an informed assessment of the performative intentions in the aesthetics of Black Theatre practice, scholars, critics, and practitioners of the discipline (particularly those who claim ancestral privilege to black experience) must necessarily study, with requisite rigor, the sacred and secular symbols of traditional African culture that issue from African Diaspora cultures. Just as Sandra Richards has revealed the role of Yoruba archetypes in the dramaturgy of August Wilson, and as Diedre Bádéjò has identified the Yoruba goddess Osun as a “paradigm for African feminist criticism,” Wole Soyinka’s critical construction of the sacred mythologies that inform Yoruba tragedy might be useful as a model for evaluating the integrity of the newly erected African Diaspora performance practice (see Soyinka in Part II of this volume).

By now it is commonly accepted in the African Diaspora that performance is not limited to an edifice, the technology of computerized sets, or the bounding of a script. An opportunity for performative expression can be located in the daily rituals of life, including “sporting events and in circuses, in storytelling and in public events, in clothing and hairstyles.” In the African tradition, theatre begins with the incantative voice of the storyteller (*griot*), the poly-rhythms of the musicians, and the gesticulate responses of the body, all orchestrated to bring spiritual enlightenment to mundane experience.

As early as 1970, buttressed by the emergence of new scholarly inquiries and reappraisals of African retention in the African American culture—e.g., Janheinz Jahn’s *Muntu* (1961), W. E. Abrams’s *The Mind of Africa* (1962), and LeRoi Jones’s (Amiri Baraka’s) *Blues People* (1963)—I was compelled by the absence of a coherent critical discourse about Black Theatre to write *The Drama of Nommo*. It was a project designed to construct a foundation for identifying the continuity of African cultural underpinnings in the American experience that informed the aesthetics of Black Theatre. Other works have emerged since then as tools for critical reference and analysis of performance practices rooted in the African and New World Diaspora, including *The Theatre of Black Americans: A Collection of Critical Essays* (ed. Errol Hill, 1980); Mance William’s *Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s: A Historical-critical Analysis of the Movement* (1985); Carlton and Barbara Molette’s *Black Theatre: Premise and Presentation* (1986); Samuel A. Hay’s *African American Theatre: A Historical and Critical Analysis* (1994); and Tejumola Olaniyan’s provocative interrogation of the Afrocentric dialectics of Black Theatre, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance* (1995).

This volume, *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, took shape in response to August Wilson’s “The Ground on Which I Stand” speech, which catalyzed the 1998 National Black Theatre Summit at Golden Pond, where more than fifty scholars and practitioners convened to examine the state of Black Theatre. The issues discussed during the five-day summit ranged from the formulation of strategies for supporting theatre as an aspect of community economic development to the development of new black playwrights through a culturally specific paradigm and standard of practice (see “Unprecedented Times,” *Black Theatre Network Magazine*, 1999). The Committee on Aesthetics, Standards, and Practice (which included myself and

two other contributors to this volume, Beverly Robinson and William Cook), arrived at the following formulation of objectives for Black Theatre practice: Black Theatre is performative, not didactic, yet seeks collective self-definition. In both ensemble and solo work, the performance objectives rise above self-aggrandizement, recognizing the tension between I/we that subjects the individual self to collective responsibility. It is a preservative and transformative dramatic ritual that requires ritual ground as the space to focus centrality of spirit. The continuity of spirit/memory is made possible through the testimonial use of call-and-response to bear witness to collective experience. It is a dynamic experience with the potential to reformulate riddles and coded messages over time through recognizable and understood rhythms that underscore the symbolic action of the trickster's infinite possibilities. Black Theatre is joy, passion, and beauty, which leads to positive illumination. The momentous meeting concluded with the formation of the African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA), a national service organization for Black Theatre in the Diaspora, with August Wilson as chairman of the board and Victor Leo Walker II, a principal organizer, as CEO and president.

In the spirit of AGIA's intent to promote a more enlightened view of Black Theatre globally, the following essays are offered, in association with my co-editors, playwright Gus Edwards and Victor Leo Walker II, as the first collection of *essential* texts to offer a critical analysis of the historical, theoretical, and performance commonalities of Black Theatre practice throughout the African Diaspora. These essays cross the borders of the African continent, the Caribbean, and the United States, amplifying the initial explorations of the retention of African memory propounded in the *Drama of Nommoo* by demonstrating the intersection between spiritual invocation and theatrical practice throughout the African Diaspora. The collection is divided into four parts, each with an expository introduction: African Roots; Mythology and Metaphysics; Dramaturgical Practice; and Performance. It concludes with an afterword by the ever-sentient cultural critic Eleanor Traylor. Finally, we offer praise to the spirit of Dr. Beverly Robinson, whose transition to the ancestors in the spring of this year leaves us a legacy of uncompromised commitment to the study and research of folk traditions in African American culture.

While these texts do not propose a singular canon for stage practices, they do present a framework for apprehending a common stylistic process in Black Theatre that has resonance throughout the African Diaspora. I should note here that we chose these particular essays for their capacity to offer an approach to the study of Black Theatre aesthetics and performance in the African Diaspora without compromising the integrity of the cultural expression unique to a particular region. It is our wish that this collection will serve as a point of critical reference for enlightened evaluation of the performance practices of Black Theatre wherever encountered.

Columbia College Chicago
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Victor Leo Walker II

Introduction

TOLEDO. *Now, what I was saying is what Slow Drag was doing is African. That's what you call an African conceptualization. That's when you call on the gods or call on the ancestors to achieve whatever your desires are. . . . Naming all those things you and Cutler done together is like . . . a bond of kinship. That's African. An ancestral retention. Only you forgot the name of the gods.*

SLOW DRAG. . . . *Don't come talking that African nonsense to me.*

TOLEDO. . . . *There's so much that goes on around you and you can't even see it.*

—August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

The terms *theatre* and *drama* will be used throughout this section and throughout this book as terms that are *inclusive* of ritual, ceremony, carnival, masquerade, testimonials, rites of passage, the blues, improvisation, “Negro spirituals,” spoken word, hip-hop, storytelling, and other performative modes of expression *rooted* in the ancestral ethos of black Africans in the Diaspora. That is, we regard these terms as encompassing much more than the conventional disciplines that, according to the Nigerian philosopher, playwright, and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, “Western European man later reduced to specialist terminologies through his chronic habit of compartmentilisation.”¹ The Western paradigm of the proscenium and the so-called “dramatic text” as essential ingredients in creating *theatre* are treated in this introduction and throughout the entire book as resources within the *matrix* of performative/ritual expressions.

The vast majority of black Africans in the Diaspora share experiences of what folklorist, scholar, and cultural historian Alan Lomax refers to as the “the African style of *collective creation*” rooted in the performative rituals and ceremonies of the community.² The communal spirit animates the full spectrum of these rituals and performances, including black Baptist church ceremonies, rhythm & blues music, and the black arts movement in the United States; canboulay rituals and calypso drama in Trinidad; carnival and condoble in Brazil; rituals of the Omo peoples in the lower

Omo River valley in southwest Ethiopia; the planting rites ceremony of the Bedik peoples in Senegal; Yoruba Masquerades and the ritual dramas of Wole Soyinka in Nigeria; Vodou ceremonies of the Fon, Ewe, and Ga peoples of West Africa (Benin, Togo and Ghana); Bianou Muslim Festival of Tuareg; ritual protest theatre of Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Kenya; folk music and poetry of the Buena Vista Social Club of Cuba; and the Black Theatre/Live Art Collective of Great Britain.

Most black Africans in the Diaspora who create performative rituals do so to reaffirm the life force of the community by engaging the community in an experience that reinforces the collective worldview in which the natural rhythms and cosmic balances of the community, despite periodic disruptions, are in harmony. Consider the traditional New Orleans African funeral march and procession, where the deceased is celebrated, not mourned, as a soul on the path of a metaphysical journey whose time on earth has come to a natural conclusion, whatever the cause of death. This reaffirms the community's collective sense of the natural order of the cosmos.

The essays in this section, "African Roots," address Soyinka's assertion that theatre and drama of the African Diaspora is "communal" and embraces the "belief in culture as defined within man's knowledge of fundamental, unchanging relationships between himself and society and within the larger context of the observable universe."

The focus on the communal in the performative rituals of black Africans in the Diaspora is distinctive. According to Soyinka:

The difference which we are seeking to define between European and African Drama as one of man's formal representations of experience is not simply a difference of style or form, nor is it confined to drama alone. It is representative of the essential differences between two world views, a difference between one culture whose very artifacts are evidence of a cohesive understanding of irreducible truths and another, whose creative impulses are directed by period dialectics. So, to begin with, we must jettison that fashionable distinction which tends to encapsulate Western drama as a form of esoteric enterprise spied upon by fee-paying strangers, as contrasted with a communal evolution of the dramatic mode of expression, this latter being African. Of far greater importance is the fact that Western dramatic criticism habitually reflects the abandonment of a belief in culture as defined within man's knowledge of fundamental, unchanging relationships between himself and society and within the larger context of the observable universe.³

"Roots in African Drama and Theatre," the first essay in this section, by the late Ghanaian playwright Joe de Graft, was originally published in 1976; yet de Graft's critique of West African drama is still relevant today. De Graft notes that in modern times Africans have embraced their indigenous rituals as they are "naturally dissatisfied" with the continued *cultural* domination of Africa by Western modes of expression, but he argues that such rituals are only one aspect of drama. Distinguishing between "magical drama" and "*dramatic art*," he illuminates the difference between ritual drama's power to summon the communal spirit and "the modern commercial theatre of pure entertainment."

Babatunde Lawal's essay, "The African Heritage of African American Art and Performance," is a thorough examination of what the character Toledo, in August Wilson's play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, refers to as "the ancestral retention[s]" of black Africans in America. Lawal's essay discusses the major role art played in precolonial African cultures, and continues to play today "because of its ontological significance." Lawal lays the historical groundwork for what will be an explication of those African retentions related to dance, music, theatre, visual arts, and customs found among Africans in the Americas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They also are incorporated into the spiritual practices of black Africans in the Americas. Lawal is particularly attentive to the ways in which African American artists and performers have been transforming their African heritage "to reflect new needs, influences, ideals and visions emanating from both sides of the Atlantic."

In "Agones: The Constitution of a Practice," Tejumola Olaniyan argues for a counter-hegemonic discourse that moves us closer to defining Black drama on its own terms. Surveying the pan-African discourses from the late nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century, Olaniyan examines the various elements of discourses on black theatre that begin to construct a language and philosophy that articulate the complexity, history, and art of black theatre practice.

Derek Walcott's "What the Twilight Says: An Overture" is an exploration of identity and its role in producing art. Walcott's art reflects two worldviews—one European and the other Afro-Caribbean.

"Caribbean Narrative: Carnival Characters—In Life and in the Mind," by Gus Edwards, explores Afro-Caribbean cultural/aesthetic forms and traditions. The essay is a discourse on certain types of theatre and performative rituals that evolved from slaves, colonial subjects, and postcolonial citizens of specific Afro-Caribbean communities. Overlapping with Walcott's terrain, Edwards poses questions that address the complexities of Afro-Caribbean identity and various cultural/aesthetic practices that illuminate the African ethos in performative rituals of the Caribbean, such as Carnival and its various manifestations as an amalgamation of African rituals and performance that include drumming, dance, Vodou ceremonies, ring shouts, and masquerade.

Illuminating the performative elements of daily life, he asserts that performance for most Afro-Caribbeans is not a social luxury but a daily ritual that affirms the community's aesthetics, customs, and worldview.

The closing essay in this section, "Rebaptizing the World in Our Own Terms: Black Theatre and Live Arts in Britain," by Michael McMillan and SuAndi, explores the fragmented history of black theatre and drama in Britain in the twentieth century. They note that in the last half of the twentieth century, the significant increase in black African and Caribbean immigration to Britain spurred a black theatre movement whose art and rhetoric was steeped in postcolonial discourse. At its peak in the 1970s the movement generated today's black theatre in Britain, a vibrant array of plays, diverse modes of performative rituals, and an ever-expanding performance art community.

The essays in this section reflect the complexity and diversity among the peoples, cultures, and customs of Africa and among blacks in the African Diaspora, from West to East Africa, from the Caribbean to the United States, from South America to Britain. These discourses present a record of the practice of black theatre/performative-ritual expressions in the African Diaspora under the oppressive circumstances of slavery, colonialism, cultural imperialism, decolonization, neocolonialism, Jim Crow, segregation, and globalism (the new capitalist hegemonic paradigm). Hence the creative spirit of African peoples and cultures discussed in this section reflect what Amiri Baraka calls the art of resistance, a performative ethos that reaffirms the ontology of the community as resistance to Eurocentric critical orthodoxies that orientalize black African diasporic cultures and cultural forms. Collectively, the essays in "African Roots" consider the social foundations of a black aesthetic form and thereby "a culturally situated Black dramatic theory"⁴ and meta-discourse for a mature, critical study of those cultural and aesthetic forms referred to as black theatre and drama of the African Diaspora.

The African roots of black drama and theatre in the Diaspora date as far back as 2500 BCE to the ancient Egyptian Passion Plays. One could argue that if the Egyptians "laid the foundation of Western civilization,"⁵ those ancient Africans could also have laid the foundation for theatre and drama. According to William Branch, theatre historian and playwright, "theatre as a communal entity did not originate about 500 BCE in early Greece but began instead over two thousand years earlier on the continent of Africa. The first 'plays' were extensions of religious observances among those ancient Africans—today known as Nubians and Egyptians—who inhabited the long lush valley of the Nile. . . . They were often, in effect, elaborate Passion Plays. . . . The best known of the early Egyptian dramas is the 'Abydos Passion Play,' whose god-hero was Osiris, corn-deity, spirit of the trees, fertility patron, and lord of life and death."⁶ Branch and theatre historian Mergot Berthold assert that the origins of Western theatre are rooted in the ritual practices of the ancient Egyptians. But the myth and ritual of the ancient classical forms have been replaced in modern times with the practice of diversionary entertainment. According to Branch:

By nature, few Black dramatists—whether Nigerian, Ghanaian, South African, African Caribbean, African Brazilian, or African American—appear inclined to engage in the exercise of their art and craft solely, or even primarily, for the purpose of producing 'diversionary entertainment.' . . . Perhaps in the tradition of those unknown African bards who created those ancient Egyptian Passion Plays, they see themselves as serving a vital function in their respective societies: that of involving themselves and their fellow humans in a challenge to the mind and spirit . . . a search for truth and *justice*—if not always beauty.⁷

Notes

1. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 6.

2. Alan Lomax, "The Land Where the Blues Began," PBS Documentary, 1990.

3. Soyinka, *Myth, Literature*, 38.
4. Tejumola Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 11.
5. Mergot Berthold, *The History of World Theater* (New York: Continuum, 1972), 9.
6. William B. Branch, *Crosswinds: An Anthology of Black Dramatists in the Diaspora* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1993), xii, xiv, xxvi.
7. Ibid.