Introduction to “Sustaining Black Theatre,” by Harvey Young

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After the forum on "The Relationship between the Academy and the Profession," inaugurating our first issue of the SDC Journal Peer-Reviewed Section (PRS) in the summer of 2015, the peer-review editorial board invited leading scholars of theatre to provide our initial set of essays on topics relating to directing and choreography at universities and on professional stages across the country. In this issue, we are very pleased to publish the following piece by Harvey Young, Chair and Professor of Theatre at Northwestern University, President-elect of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), and a prominent scholar writing on theatre and race and black theatre in America. This inaugural essay serves as an example of scholarship focusing on important contemporary issues and historical trends in the fields. We hope these first invited essays inspire authors working in and thinking about our professions to submit pieces for peer-reviewed publication in future. For detailed submission guidelines, please see the website or contact the co-editors directly.

INTRODUCED - EDITED BY ANNE FLIOTSOS + ANN M. SHANAHAN

The frustration and, indeed, anger of the Black Lives Matter movement centers on the alarming number of unarmed men, women, and children who have been gunned down by law enforcement officials. Protestors actively critique a justice system that often condones the violation of the Constitution and the civil rights of citizens. In the theatre, it led to the commissioning of artists to create new works that capture the emotion and energy of the moment. Hands Up: Six Playwrights, Six Testaments, produced by New York City-based New Black Fest is one of many recent examples.

Black life has long been a significant—and, arguably, a central—concern of mainstream American theatre. Abolitionists employed the stage to present portraits of the devastating day-to-day experiences of American chattel slavery. As bodies hanged from trees across the United States, New Negro proponents called for the creation of a wide array of performances to record the emotional toll and the devastating loss of lives. The experience of living in segregated and, later, slowly desegregating America was captured in the dramas and musicals of the Civil Rights and post-Civil Rights era. With regularity, artists have gathered over the past fifty years to assess the development of black theatre and call for the creation of new works that tell the stories of black life and preserve the richness of black culture.

This article offers an overview of the imbricated nature of black theatre and black life. In the following pages, I chronicle how the stage offered an opportunity to raise awareness and bring attention to experiences of racial violence and abuse. I look at how arts professionals and civil rights proponents repeatedly, for more than a century, advocated for the development of creative works about, by, for, and near African Americans. I draw attention to the frequency of such calls to sustain black theatre in order to reveal how black theatre, like black life, is simultaneously vibrant and under threat.

Black Life on Stage
Blackface minstrelsy is widely considered to be one of the most significant American contributions to Western theatrical practice. Conventional wisdom is that Greece contributed tragic form, Italy opera, England a recognizable narrative structure, and Japan a gestural vocabulary that inspired generations of avant-garde and experimental artists. The US contribution was the actor “blacking up” and impersonating someone with brown skin. Thanks to the circuits travelled by troupes of artists, blackface reached not only Great Britain but also the expanses of the British Empire. Audiences flocked to see the minstrel show. They revel in the opportunity to spend time with a “Black” person and to be entertained by a set of acts imagined as being essentially or authentically black. Their preference for this style has been...
well documented, from Mark Twain publicly
declaring his adoration of the "nigger show" to
the manner in which the blackface form
was eagerly adopted by nascent film producers
in such Hollywood cinematic fare as The Jazz
Singer.

As legend has it, actor T.D. Rice first delighted
audiences in the 1820s by成本uming himself
like a nearby African American porter or "stable
hand" (Thompson 159). This performance,
which would blossom into his widely popular
"Jump Jim Crow" song and dance routine,
would be staged in sold out venues across
the United States and, by Rice and his
imitators, around the globe. Through his racial
impressionation, Rice rendered black bodies
dramatically interesting for a worldwide
audience. He also framed expectations for
the performing black body as being marked
by excess in regards to dialect, costume, and
movement. Whereas Rice toured the United
States and the United Kingdom, the artists
who he influenced traveled increasingly
broader international circuits. In so doing, they
introduced black lives—albeit in stereotypical
fashion—to a diverse, worldwide set of
attendees.

The legacy of Rice and his followers is evident
in Uncle Tom's Cabin, George Aiken's 1852
theatrical adaptation of Harriet Beecher
Stowe's popular novel. Early in the play, a
young black slave child named Harry performs
for the amusement of two white men. Aiken's
directions reveal that Harry "sings and dances
around the stage." The link to minstrelsy is
made certain when one of the men-greets the
boy: "Hulloa! Jim Crow!" Harry, as slave, must
perform. The danger of his situation is made
legible in the entrance of his mother, Eliza,
who "grasps the child eagerly in her arms, and
cast[s] another glance of apprehension" in the
direction of the man before she and her son
exit.

Numerous scholars have written about the
excesses contained within the myriad stagings
of Uncle Tom's Cabin across the nineteenth
century. The academic focus on the presence
of live animals or technological wonders—for
element, a treadmill on which horses allegedly
galloped in pursuit of Eliza—as well as the
many Tom-themed souvenirs and collectibles
can obscure a simple truth: the success of
the play and the novel depended upon its
spotlighting of black life and experiences.
Uncle Tom's Cabin, as penned by Beecher
Stowe, was intended to be an abolitionist
text. The play offers a fictionalized version
of everyday black existence and reveals the
savagery of a system of enforced servitude.
Even as audiences may have rejoiced at the
minstrel-inspired singing and dancing of Harry,
they were forced to witness and, perhaps,
empathize with the title character being
subjected to the lash of Simon Legree.
The whipping of Tom proved to be one of the
more memorable aspects of the narrative.
Indeed, the visual spectacle of poorly treated
and physically abused black bodies informed
the popular iconography of Uncle Tom's
Cabin. Among the most extreme material
objects produced by the Tom trade were
miniature cardboard character cutouts which
were inserted into regional newspapers and
allowed the user, presumably children and
their guardians, to recreate the play, including
the abuse of Tom within their homes. These
cardboard cutouts were akin to present day
stickers found in children's cereal boxes. They
were intended to amuse. The invitation to role-play
may have allowed children to find pleasure in
the abuse of the black body—similar to the
way in which performance historian Robin
Bernstein astutely describes the treatment
of Tom themed black dolls in her book
Racial Innocence (210). Regardless, the novel,
theatrical adaptation, and themed collectibles
staged the procraty of black life.

As the nineteenth century concluded and the
subsequent century began, black artists
managed to achieve greater authority in the
scribing of black culture through performance.
Aida Overton Walker's choreography shone
a spotlight on the social dances of black folk.
It revealed how African Americans actively
contributed to American performance culture
by remaking a range of elements inspired by
African diasporic ritual and the witnessing—
from the margins of servitude—of white
genteel dance. Black life could be expressed
through gesture and movement. A similar
articulation occurred within the theatre,
as the work of George Walker, Overton's
husband, Bert Williams, and their collaborators
demonstrate. Williams's performance of the
1905 song "Nobody," with lyrics penned by
Alex Rogers, offers a refreshingly candid insight
into the experience of living a marginalized
existence. Despite being a comic song sung
in an invented black dialect by the Bahamian
actor, the lyrics reveal the harsh conditions of
black life: "Where life seems full of clouds
and rain. And I am full of nothing and pain.
Who soothes my thumpin', thumpin' brain?
Nobody." The fact thatynchings of black men,
women, and children continued to occur in an
unchanged manner across the United States
as Williams sang "Nobody" may have allowed
the song to resonate with the contemporary
experiences of listeners.

The rise of naturalism, despite being tainted
by the residues of the previous century's
sentimental, melodramatic, and blackface
styles, offered an opportunity to better
reflect the experiences of black folk. The
most famous definition of black theatre was
pened by W.E.B. Du Bois who called for
the creation of art that was "about us, by
us, for us, and near us" (134). Reflecting on
recent nineteenth-century stagings of black
characters as caricatures, Du Bois understood
that representations of African Americans often
were staged by white Negro delineators and
performed before primarily white audiences.
Although purportedly "about" African Americans,
these works imagined an unrealistic,
abnormal picture of black life that was not
consistent with the lived realities and daily
experiences of actual black people. If black
artists created theatre about black folk and
shared them with black audiences in their own
communities, then these performances could
be understood as political acts that worked to
revive the social standing of African Americans
in public life.

With limited production venues, Du Bois
and his contemporaries, especially Alain
Locke, encouraged the publication of plays
and poetry within periodicals such as Theatre Arts
Monthly and Crisis. They invited readers to
share these printed artistic works with family
members and, perhaps, neighbors. Plays
were read aloud. In some households, roles
were distributed among family members in
order to facilitate the staging of the play.
The drama of black life entered the homes
of African Americans and non-black allies of
the New Negro movement. Through the telling,
listening, and re-performance of stories about
the everyday experiences of black folk, the
bonds of community were forged. Sitting
within his or her parlor, a person could be
transported to another place and encounter a
range of black folk whose daily realities were
shockingly familiar. They could commiserate
with friends, family, and neighbors who shared
a point of view on the experience of being
black in the early twentieth century. The
drama of the New Negro era was essential to
articulating the black experience. As theatre
historian Koritha Mitchell has observed, New
Negro artists "wanted African Americans to
recognize themselves in the scripts and to take
pride in what they saw, even if it was laced with
sorrow" (41).

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, communities
of artists gathered to revive the depiction
of black life with an aim to create art that
reflected the complexity as well as the beauty
of African American culture. Scholars, including
David Krasner and Jonathan Shandell, have
written authoritatively about the development
of such communities across the United States,
from Georgia Douglas Johnson's famed 5
Street Salon at the heart of the Baltimore-
Washington corridor, Beale Street in Memphis,
and along "the Stroll" in Chicago to name
just a few places. These homes and clubs
nurtured the creation of black artistry that
could rally community and effectively articulate
socio-political critiques. In Harlem's Theaters,
Adrienne Macki Braccon offers a series of rigorously researched case studies that demonstrate the political charge that results from the intermixing and political organizing of activists and artists. Writing about Harlem's Krigwa Players, Macki Braccon notes, "Du Bois and the theater's founders saw themselves as progressing social revolutionaries entrusting the local stage as a laboratory for their social experiments" (50).

African American theater companies spurred the development of black artistry by issuing calls for new work and establishing a network that aided its circulation. For example, Krigwa "discovered" and widely disseminated the writings of playwrights Willis Richardson and Bulalie Scence. The "negro units" of the Federal Theatre Project existed in dozens of US cities, spanning the east and west coasts. Art began the campaign for black art; in the 1920s and 1930s, introduced and widely shared the work of authors whose aesthetics revised stereotypical minstrel representations. Although scholars have rightly noted that black intellectuals debated the merits of "high art" and "folk art," a general agreement existed on the fact that black artistry allows diverse audiences an opportunity to bear witness to African American experiences.

Writing a generation later for The Drama Review, Larry Neale, cofounder of Black Arts Repertory Theatre, outlined how the Black Arts Movement was a folk arts campaign intended to engage neighborhoods, reflect their residents' voices, and effect political change. He opens with the following declaration: "The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community" (29). Further noting that the "[p]olitical values inherent in the Black Power concept are now finding concrete expression in the aesthetics of Afro-American [artists];" he asserts that black life is inseparable from black artistry. This is evident in Amiri Baraka's 1964 play Dutchman, arguably the most famous drama of the period. In it, Clay confronts societal racism, vents about the misperceptions of black life that are rampant within society, and, ultimately, loses his life. He is murdered. The play, which Baraka initially staged in the Lower East Side before moving it to the streets of Harlem, invites audience members to bear witness to the articulation of black experience. As theatre, it presents these experiences in a communal setting and invites spectators to reflect with one another. Certainty, the message of the play was not lost on Howard Taubman, in his New York Times review. Taubman observed, "If this is the way even one Negro feels, there is ample cause for guilt as well as alarm, and for a hastening of change."

In calling for a more forceful articulation of identity and advocating for the development of (black) community-based theatres, BAM artists underscored the importance of collective organization to the advancement of black arts and politics. In a nation struggling with segregation, debating the necessity of civil rights, and beginning to witness an increasing disparity in how darker complexioned folks were treated by the justice system, a movement emerged that succeeded in championing the independent production of art that engages the personal and the political.

**HOLDING GROUND**

In June 1956, playwright August Wilson stood in front of the full membership of the Theatre Communications Group at an annual meeting at Princeton University. The keynote speaker occupied the highest rung of the American theatre. He had won the Pulitzer Prize twice and collected numerous major theatre awards, including the Tony Award. His presence at the lectern was a sign of how far the American Theatre had come, from the antics of T.D. Rice and the minstrelsy of Aiken to this moment and this man. What could have been a celebratory occasion at the arrival of perhaps the "black hope" of late twentieth century theatre ended up serving as the staging ground for a forceful, impassioned, and searing critique of the racial divide within the theatre industry.

Although mostly remembered for his comments on colorblind casting, which spurred a series of debates with a prominent critic and detractor, Wilson's address advocated for the expansion opportunities for black artists by calling for the development and support of black theatre companies. Despite the fact that his comments often are framed as a lamentation on the decline of black theatre, the playwright was optimistic about the state of black artistry but, admittedly, pessimistic about its sustainability. He declared, "If you don't know, I will tell you that black theatre in America is alive...It is vibrant...It is vital...It just isn't funded" (495). The address, titled "The Ground on Which I Stand," served as the first salvo in a campaign to restructure American theatre in a manner that would render black theatre companies financially stable. The urgency of his address anchored itself in his belief that it is only through black artistic collectives that the experiences of African Americans can be translated to the stage. This was a lesson that he learned as a young adult during the Black Arts Movement, a period that he memorably identified as "the kiln in which I was fired" (494). It was also something that he sought to teach within his own plays, which offer ample opportunities for actors and audiences alike to immerse themselves within majority black communities. Theatre historian Harry J. Elam expresses it best, in "The Post as Present in the Drama of August Wilson, when he succinctly notes that within Wilson's dramaturgy, "the truth of race lies in the intersections of lived experience and the social, cultural, historical constructions of blackness" (221).

To this day, Wilson's TCG speech continues to exist as a widely circulating manifesto, available in its entirety in a variety of online and print outlets. It is considered to be the best reflection of his voice and politics. The significance of "The Ground on Which I Stand" to his legacy is evidenced in the fact that a 2015 PBS documentary, which premiered on the 70th anniversary of his death, bears the same title. The importance and easy availability of his remarks inspired a new generation of black artists, such as director Derrick Sanders, who recalled the impact of reading Wilson's words in college (qtd in Young and Zabriskie). Sanders cofounded Chicago's Congo Square Theatre Company, to which Wilson's widow would later request that mourners of her husband's passing send financial donations in lieu of flowers. At the very least, the speech initiated a national conversation on the future of the American theatre. It prompted a consideration of what role black arts might play in the new millennium, especially as the "century of the color line," as W.E.B. Du Bois famously called the twentieth century, neared its end.

Wilson, again, placed a spotlight on the necessity of sustaining black theatre in 1998 when he cohosted, with theatre critic Victor Leo Walker II and literary scholar William Cook, a national conversation at Dartmouth College. "On Golden Pond," the name of the gathering, was enabled through the fortuitous timing of several interrelated events: the playwright's residency at Dartmouth as well as the presence of multiple Dartmouth faculty members with a commitment to aiding the development of black artistry. Wilson's celebrity, coupled with the lingering controversies from his TCG address, attracted "leading black theater artists, scholars and community organizers, entrepreneurs and corporate executives," including Nitoshake Shange, Ifa Bayeza, and Trulani Davis among others ("Playwright"). "On Golden Pond" offered a compelling reminder of the power of collective advocacy. It recalled the combined efforts of past arts leaders who understood the political potential of black artistry. Walker, in an article announcing the impending summit, asserted that the event "reflects the spirit of Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, and so many others who struggled to attain social and cultural equity for black people in America" (621). This first contemporary gathering, a five-day, closed door discussion followed by a single day public conference, existed as a space and site of collective possibility. The mission was to devise strategies to sustain black theatre and foster...
its growth. It is estimated that three hundred people attended the public portion of the Dartmouth summit (Kendt, "August").

From a contemporary perspective, few theatre artists can identify concrete outcomes of that gathering. What were the lasting reforms inspired by Wilson, Walker, and Cook's National Black Theatre Summit? In a 4 February 1998 Dartmouth news release, the planned structure and closed-door discussion themes were revealed: "Participants will break into small groups to consider such topics as how to encourage black playwrights, build audiences, and address the legal, social, financial and aesthetic issues related to developing African American theater" ("Playwright"). Journalist Ronald Roach, in a recap of the summit that merged the language of the Dartmouth release with excerpts from a post-event interview with a participant, noted that one attendee, theatre scholar Samuel Hey, hoped that the conversation would spark the development of a National Endowment for African-American Theatre with a $25 million endowment.

There were several limited term accomplishments of the Dartmouth summit. In response to the gathering, the university created scholarships for underrepresented minority graduate students in theatre management. Although such a designated program no longer exists, Tuck Business School continues to incentivize nonprofit work by offering graduates working in such areas access to a loan forgiveness program. The most significant outcome of the National Black Theatre summit was the creation of the African Grove Institute for the Arts. Theatre historian Annamane Bean notes that it "was formed with August Wilson as the Chairman of the Board and Victor Lea Walker II as the CEO and President" (123). The African Grove, borrowing its name from William Wells Brown's theatre company from the 1820s, was established with a mission to support and revitalize black performing arts institutions. Active for nearly a decade, AGIA succeeded in organizing two additional summits in Los Angeles and, more generally, existed as a service agency in support of black artistry, especially in secondary schools. Ultimately, AGIA fell short of Wilson's goals. As Talvin Wilks notes in a 2013 How/round article, "after a few convenings and an unwieldy bureaucracy, it resulted in very little, leading Wilson to lament in an interview, 'I'm willing to bet that if you go back and look at all the money that was spent on all this there was less money given to black theaters than before.'

Since "On Golden Pond," there have been several gatherings of theatre professionals with the explicit aim of reviving Wilson's call to assess and sustain black theatre. The first one held at the Los Angeles Theatre Center (LATC) in May 1998 continued the conversation begun at the New Hampshire conference and provided a progress report. In addition to the announcement of the business school scholarships, organizers—Wilson, Walker, Cook, Bayeza, and UCLA professor Beverly Robinson—expressed a desire to "publish a quarterly journal and/or a popular monthly about black performing arts" (Kendt, "August").

Three years later, Walker and Cook organized a second AGIA-sponsored summit at the LATC. Reports of that gathering suggest optimism at AGIA's likely ability to achieve its aims. Rob Kendt, writing for Backstage, notes, "Convening more than 100 theatre professionals, ...the African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA) unveiled to the West Coast its initial plans to become the NAACP for the arts at a three-day private retreat and a two-day public forum last week" ("Meeting"). In addition to touting the success of the Tuck scholarships, organizers expressed a desire to create "a national capital campaign to help dispense grants, loans, and lines of credit to artists and arts organizations and a full-length documentary on black theatre" (Kendt, writing for Backstage).

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National black theatre summits have experienced a resurgence in recent years. In August 2014, Dr. Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre in New York City hosted a four-day symposium, "Moving the Black Theatre Legacy Forward," attended by representatives of twenty theatre companies. The culminating event of the gathering was a public conversation moderated by Dafina McMillan, director of TCG's Diversity & Inclusion Initiative and also its director of communications, and featuring Ruben Santiago-Hudson.
Aila Jones-Harvey, Sade Lythcott, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Carmen Morgan, and Bridgit Antoinette Evans. It was webcast live by Howlround, the online "knowledge commons." In the wide-ranging discussion, Morgan noted how the current financial struggles of black theatres could be caused, in part, by a new challenge: the "intentionality on the part of white theatres" to engage "diversity and inclusion" that results in these companies "creating opportunities" for audiences traditionally served by black theatre companies. Other panelists noted the necessity of improving the management structure of black theatre companies, beginning with developing capacity building initiatives and creating arts leadership internships for artists of color. Kwei-Armah, artistic director of Baltimore Centerstage, stressed the importance of expanding the audience base and squarely placed the onus on everyone for bringing folks to the theatre. He imagines a straightforward recruitment conversation: "Have you been to the theatre lately? Come along with me." The 2014 convening was mostly diagnostic. It provided an opportunity to spotlight contemporary challenges and cleared space for a collective brainstorming of how to maintain the vibrancy of black arts across the 21st century.

The most recent convening was held in April 2015 in Chicago at the Goodman Theatre. Organized by director Chuck Smith, Ron OJ Parson, Willow Taylor and myself, the summit was one of the closing events of a two-month-long, city-wide celebration of August Wilson's life and career curated by the aforementioned organizers with Costanza Romero, Wilson's widow. Whereas the previous summit functioned as an opportunity to address the state of black theatre, the Chicago gathering sought to offer practical lessons and advice on how to sustain black theatre by focusing on the financial pressures faced by theatre companies. Attended by artistic directors of prominent black theatre companies, including Kenny Leon, True Colors Theatre Company, Eileen Morris, Ensemble Theatre, Woodie King Jr., New Federal Theatre, and Ekundayo Bandele, Matiliso Theatre, as well as theatre scholars, the two-day closed-door gathering offered the opportunity to reflect on the financial realities of black theatre companies. Discussion centered on board development and the topic of leadership succession. One of the most compelling insights of the gathering was an acknowledgment that the effort to sustain black theatre demands the active recruitment of both African American and non-African American allies as donors (and board members) and audience members. Black theatre in the 21st century can only thrive with an ethnically diverse alliance working collectively to create new work as well as stage classic plays that still adhere to a commonly held principle: black theatre needs to offer an honest reflection of black experiences.

The need to sustain black performing arts was made palpable by two events coinciding with the Chicago summit. The first was a series of protests organized by or aligning with the "Black Lives Matter" movement. Participants spoke about the recent murder of Walter Scott, a fifty-year-old unarmed black man, whose death was recorded on a cell phone camera. Scott was shot in the back as he fled a police officer. The second was the Goodman's production of August Wilson's play Two Trains Running. In that play, which is set in 1969, the precarity of black life is openly discussed. Memphis, the protagonist, makes a comment that seems to be ripped from the headlines. He declares: "They had that boy Beagaboo. The police walked up and shot him in the head and (protestors) went down to see the mayor. Raised all kinds of hell. Trying to get the cops charged with murder. They raised hell for three weeks. After that, it was business as usual." (84). The name Beagaboo could have been replaced with Tamir Rice or Scott among many others. It was compelling to hear the truth of present represented in a play that not only was twenty-five years old—it premiered in 1990—but also was set almost a half-century ago. Not much seemed to have change.

The movement to champion and sustain black performing arts institutions is ongoing. Indeed, it has been a continuous campaign since the founding of Wells Brown's African Grove. Despite the continued call to devise strategies to preserve black artistry, it would be a mistake to assume that progress has not occurred. Financial sustainability is a concern of every theatre company, regardless of the racial or ethnic make-up of the company and staff. What the summits have allowed is an opportunity for artists to talk specifically about their reality while underscoring the continued necessity of developing work about, by, for, and near black folks. An ancillary benefit is that summits, conferences, and gatherings forge professional networks and encourage the passing of history and knowledge across generations. Black theatre is black life.