

**TOWARDS A QUEER BLACK FEMINIST THEATRE AESTHETIC:  
BLACK AMERICAN THEATER BY THREE BLACK FEMALE PLAYWRIGHTS IN  
THE YEARS 1915 – 1920**

**By**

DEANNA LYNETTE DOWNES

B.A., Eastern University, 1997

M.F.A., Columbia University, 2004

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Beth Osnes, Ph.D. (Committee Chair)

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Amma Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin, Ph.D. (Committee Member)

Date \_\_\_\_\_

The final copy of this dissertation has been examined by the signatories, and we  
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Downes, Deanna Lynette (Ph.D., Theatre & Dance)

Towards a Queer Black Feminist Theater Aesthetic: Black American Theater by Three Black  
Female Playwrights in the Years 1915 – 1920

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Beth Osnes

“Black women playwrights in particular have ensured its [Black culture’s] survival through creating performance pieces that reflexively evaluate their life experiences” (Sunni-Ali). This dissertation is an analysis of three, queer, black female playwrights – Mary Powell Burrill, Angelina Weld Grimké and Alice Dunbar Nelson - from the early twentieth century who did just that. I am interested in the reflexive analysis of black life in America that their plays offered their audiences. I am interested in how these plays reached black audiences - their manner of disbursement and performance – in magazine publications such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s *The Crisis* and Margaret Sanger’s *The Birth Control Review*. I landed firmly with the first, professionally produced, non-musical dramatic piece of black theater created by a black female playwright, *Rachel*, by Angelina Weld Grimké (Brown-Guillory 5; Perkins 8). In 1919, *The Birth Control Review*, an “advocacy publication published in the US in the early 20th century by the American Birth Control League” (“The Birth Control Review Archives”) published Mary P. Burrill’s *They That Sit in Darkness*, the second subject of this dissertation. The third subject, *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, by Alice Dunbar-Nelson, was published in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s magazine *The Crisis*, in 1918. An analysis of these three plays revealed early evidence of a queer black feminist theatre aesthetic as an early 20<sup>th</sup> century foundation of black drama.

Burrill, Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson created a subversive black, queer, feminist theater that created fully fleshed black identities, in particular black female identities, in situations that reflected black existence of the time period. Through their publication in magazines, the work remained mostly within the community and acted as a model for rehearsing black identity in the sacred and safe spaces of the black community.

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***Preface: An entry to the past via voice, text and rhythms of speech left as signatures of history.***

Full Disclosure. I am black. I am a director of theatre. I am queer. I am woman. The order is interchangeable. I am a queer, black, woman director of theatre. In those intersections of race, gender, sexual fluidity and artistic profession, I exist in the margins. This research creates my own space to rediscover the whole of my self in history, to create a method to develop alternative productions for my directorial work and to critique the work that exists with me in the margins.

To understand the breaths between the words and sentences, to speak the unspeakable in the safety of private spaces, kitchen, living rooms, around the dinner table is what this work is doing. This work is asking for a new evaluation of the way we produce African American/Black theater, in particular, plays by U.S. based black women. Black history as recorded through our ancestral mothers and black female poets who became playwrights to write and record what they saw and experienced as black women. This study affords us an opportunity to experience a feminized segment of Black history. What else can be learned from this re-evaluation and re-visitation of our past? Black women have been more than a figurine in the history of blackness and more than a figurine in the history of civil rights and the history of black dramatic works of Black theater. The plays within this study and others written by black female playwrights in the early twentieth century are evidence of black female voices, and, hence, they are my voice, an echo of my past which resounds in the present. I am pursuing an autoethnographic method of embodied practice through small group play readings in an effort to revisit my past as told by my gender as told by my ancestral mothers as told by me.

I initially intended to write about emerging 21<sup>st</sup> century Black female playwrights. I intended to name and define a New Black Theater Movement for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My research focused on analysis of queer scripts and productions of three “emerging” black female



playwrights: Christina Anderson, Katori Hall and Eisa Davis. I use the word “emerging” because it is a moniker used in American theater to define artists who are just beginning to gain recognition for their work in American theater. The term has little to do with age or the expanse of one’s career in theater. I use the word “queer” because of the content and characters of those scripts. Christina Anderson in *Good Goods* (2009), subtlety negotiates a fluid sexuality of her characters through costume changes over the whole of the play. Katori Hall in her play *Mountaintop* (2009) queers the idea of God by identifying God as female and wielding a mobile phone. Eisa Davis queers an entire town in *Bulrushes* (2006) through sexually questioning characters, non-hetero-normative family units, and incorporation of alternative spirituality.

I intended to explore the queering of representations of blackness. Were these gendered representations? Were these representations of blackness new? Were they specific to contemporary black American culture? I had difficulty finding a framework within which to analyze these playwrights and their plays. I needed to explore historical staged black representations of blackness before beginning to write criticism on contemporary stage representations. I decided to shift my focus to the past, beginning with the earliest performances of blackness, minstrelsy, pre and post-Civil War and the Reconstruction Era searching specifically for the creative contributions of black female playwrights.

I landed firmly with the first, professionally produced, non-musical dramatic piece of black theater created by a black female playwright, *Rachel*, by Angelina Weld Grimké (Brown-Guillory 5; Perkins 8). *Rachel* was published in 1916 but written a few years earlier. Angelina Weld Grimké’s play was a submission in *The Crisis* magazine’s play contest. It pointed towards magazine submissions as a viable avenue for new black play publication and wide spread distribution. The types of magazines containing black literature and black social and political

events led me to inquiries about magazine submissions as viable avenues for black women to publish and distribute plays. I found two additional black female playwrights also published in magazines. In 1919, *The Birth Control Review*, an “advocacy publication published in the US in the early 20th century by the American Birth Control League” (“The Birth Control Review Archives”) published Mary P. Burrill’s *They That Sit in Darkness*, the second subject of this dissertation. The third subject, *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, by Alice Dunbar-Nelson, was published in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s magazine *The Crisis*, in 1918. An analysis of these three plays revealed early evidence of a queer black feminist theatre aesthetic as an early 20<sup>th</sup> century foundation of black drama.

**Chapter 1**  
**Introduction**

## Introduction

“Black women playwrights in particular have ensured its [Black culture’s] survival through creating performance pieces that reflexively evaluate their life experiences” (Sunni-Ali). This dissertation is an analysis of three, queer, black female playwrights - Mary Powell Burrill, Angelina Weld Grimké and Alice Dunbar-Nelson - from the early twentieth century who did just that. I am interested in the reflexive analysis of black life in America that their plays offered their audiences. I am interested in how these plays reached black audiences - their manner of disbursement and performance – in magazine publications such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s *The Crisis* and Margaret Sanger’s *The Birth Control Review*. As America entered the twentieth century, black dramatic theater was taking form and further defining two different voices or faces of black identity to present to the world. Which black identity to present was dictated by the audience that would see it, white audiences or black audiences, creating a binary within the production of black theatre. Burrill, Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson’s plays created fully fleshed black identities, in particular black female identities, in situations that reflected black existence of the time period. Through their publication in magazines, the work remained mostly within the community and acted as a model for rehearsing black identity in the sacred and safe spaces of the black community. My study advances that these three playwrights laid the foundation for a subversive and alternative theatre aesthetic that was not only black feminist but also queer.

Diligent study of letters and poems generated by the these women, all of whom were college graduates and schoolteachers in the Washington, D.C. and Delaware areas (Hull; Allen; Perkins), reveals their individual queer sexual identities. Angelina Weld Grimké repressed her

love of women because her father Archibald Grimké did not approve how her letters to a Mamie Kern and Mary (Mamie) Powell Burrill revealed a deep same-sex affection (Hull 95–97; Hull 139–147; Beemyn 48). Mary Powell Burrill lived with her life partner Lucy Diggs Slowe, the first Dean of Women at Howard University (Beemyn 78). Alice Dunbar-Nelson, one-time wife of poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, also held deep affection for women and had multiple same-sex affairs. One affair was with a woman she met while on a trip to California. Dunbar-Nelson wrote about the affair in her journal over the next year (Hull 97). Of the three women, Alice Dunbar-Nelson was sexually attracted to both men and women but all three lived a homosocial lifestyle in Washington D.C. and Delaware forming deep and lasting relationships with women (Hull 63; Smith-Rosenberg 9).

Their queer identities and lives as playwrights intersected in a writing group which met in the home of another black female playwright, Georgia Douglas Johnson (Hull; Perkins; Harris). This “chief circle of Black writers in Washington” (Hutchinson) included other queer, Black playwrights and poets such as Langston Hughes and Alain Locke. The group congregated in a private space to share their writing, exchange creative ideas and also to discuss black culture and politics. Documentation of the writers group dates back to the 1920’s (Hutchinson 685; Harris 207; Hull) but I surmise an earlier female writers version of the group existed during my period of study because of the overlaps of these three women’s creative lives. Burrill and Grimké taught at M Street School, later renamed Dunbar High School, where they both mentored playwright May Miller. Burrill used the school as a platform to write, produce and direct her own work in addition to plays by international playwrights Maurice Maeterlink and J.M. Barrie (Perkins; Allen) and productions with the NAACP theater group Kriwga Players (Allen 87). Alice Dunbar-Nelson after unsuccessfully applying to teach at M Street moved to Delaware but gave

permission for M Street to produce her play, *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918). The overlaps continue in shared publications and ideas, Burrill's play *They That Sit in Darkness* was published in the 1919 *The Birth Control Review* with Grimké's short story, *The Closing Door*. *The Closing Door* "...is a perfect symbol for the experiences of many of the women in [Alice Dunbar-Nelson's] *The Goodness of St. Rocque* [(1899)]" (Hull 51). The theme of the family that remains after a lynching is mirrored in *Aftermath* (1919), another of Burrill's plays, and Grimké's *Rachel*. "...African-American female dramatists' characters speak and communicate in overlapping aesthetics, with sublime nuance..." (Allen 8). The overlapping aesthetics in this study are black feminist and queer. *Aftermath*, was written within a year of Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, and also offers the "black soldier as an affirming figure" (Mitchell 82) showing the before and after of enlistment; nothing changes for the Black man regardless of patriotic service. These crossovers in topics, producing and publishing suggest these women were creatively involved in the development of each other's work and in the work being published.

The writers group's structure and function may have been reminiscent of the Black Women's Club Movement of the Progressive Era because Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson were active members of the movement (Mitchell 222). Black women's clubs focused on social and political justice within a community by organizing protests, offering schooling for girls, raising money and more (Higginbotham 152). The content of the plays also focused on social and political justice within black communities but through a dramatic presentation, which could work in tandem with the protests. Perhaps Burrill, the longest resident of Washington D.C. would have offered her home as a space/platform for commentary on and questioning of social injustices among women, in particular black queer women of color. Burrill shared a home with her partner Lucy Diggs Slowe in Washington, D.C. Commentary could later be transposed onto characters

created in their theatrical works. As Carol Allen accounts: “Black women of the early twentieth century realized as well that their theatrical works would, in all probability, be more often read than beheld. Magazine prizes and strong editors guaranteed that their texts would have a forum...” (90). In light of this, perhaps members of the writers group read their works aloud in private spaces—homes—instead? In reading each other’s works aloud and perhaps providing feedback, did these three queer black female playwrights writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century lay foundations for a queer black feminist theatre aesthetic? This Black women’s writing group functioned as a queered site of resistance and a site for developing the core themes of what today we call Black Feminist Thought which helps to define a queer black feminist theatre aesthetic.

### **Black Feminist Theatre Aesthetic**

#### *Black Feminist Thought.*

“It is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others” (Lorde 45). Black Feminist theory was developed by black women intellectuals as a voice to reflect black woman’s experiences as a valid scholarly source of knowledge creation. Developed by scholars, Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Smith, and Angela Davis among others, Black Feminist theory allows the intersections of race, class and gender to inform knowledge creation (Collins 21; Smith; Johnson and Henderson 4). I am using specific core themes from foundational texts of Black Feminist theory, however this does not exclude Womanist theory as defined by scholars Alice Walker, Glenora Hudson-Weems and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi. This study uses the terminology Black feminism in lieu of Womanism on the grounds that I am extending Lisa Anderson’s theory of Black feminist theatre aesthetics, a dependent of Black feminism. Defining a queer black feminist aesthetic versus a Womanist theatre aesthetic also

allows me to deconstruct queer, and black feminism in application to each play, however I acknowledge my results may easily align with Womanist theories.

*Black Feminist Theatre Aesthetic.*

In American theatre and drama, Lisa M. Anderson compellingly employs Black Feminist theory by defining a “black feminist theatre aesthetic.” She writes:

By ‘aesthetic’ I mean not the “beauty” of a text, but rather the elements of the text or performance that invoke a particular history, politics, or philosophy of a “community” (broadly construed). The elements of the text or performance that comprise the aesthetic may range from structure, to plot, to characters (Anderson 115).

Anderson defines the aesthetics of black feminist theatre through an analysis of contemporary plays and playwrights such as Suzan-Lori Parks, Kia Corthron and Pearl Cleage, her study also acknowledges the work of early 20<sup>th</sup> century black female playwrights, Burrill, Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson, as undoubtedly black feminist drama. Anderson’s book does well to provide a structure for beginning to identify a black feminist theatre aesthetic. Anderson incorporates themes from Black Feminist Thought and applies them to dramatic works to identify similar themes across a span of plays to then label the plays as presenting a black feminist theater aesthetic. I extend her tenets to include queer, not just as a sexual identity for the characters within the plays, but as an ideology of nonnormativity that pervades the playwrights’ lives, the environment in which they created dramatic works, and extends to the use of space within the play texts and in the characters minds. By focusing on Burrill, Grimké, and Dunbar-Nelson, this dissertation demonstrates how the black feminist theatre aesthetic assumes an intersectional analysis of race and gender opening the conversation to specific themes of Black Feminist



Thought and to queer subjectivity.

### **Queering the Black Feminist Theatre Aesthetic**

A queer black feminist theatre project also explores the black female experience through central characters in Black theater plays written by black female playwrights. Queer black female playwrights also answer the question of what it means to be a black woman in America by creating black female characters presented through the medium of theater. However, their self-defining as black women is doubly important because these queer black women are creating black female characters amongst members of a writing group comprised of queer black women. To me, this suggests that they are presenting images of black women that are informed by queer life experience. My use of queer here incorporates sexuality –their personal lives as women who love women – their advanced educations, and the environment in which they created their plays - the artist gatherings with others also living a lesbian or gay lifestyle (Hull 189).

### *Queer Time, Queer Space and Queer Subjects in Drama*

In his book, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Judith “Jack” Halberstam defines queer as “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (6), yielding derivative concepts of “queer space” and “queer time”. These concepts are foundational for understanding the many layers in which the black female playwrights’ sexuality, lives, characters and writing sit outside of the norm in the early twentieth century. Halberstam’s definition of queer space refers to the creation of physical spaces that exist outside of the, in this case white heteropatriarchal society, in which “queer people engage” (Halberstam 6). The spaces in which these women developed

work—the private gathering spaces such as church meeting rooms, and, in particular, the writing salons held in artists’ homes—were queer. The fact that they all were lesbians and/or bisexual points to a queer lifestyle. Revealing the inner emotional and intellectual lives of black women was exposing a queer space to the audience of the day. Queer Time is “specific models of temporality that emerge...once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (Halberstam 6). Since black existence sat outside white heteropatriarchal societies of the twentieth century, plays that detail a span of black living detail moments of queer time.

I posit that Angelina Weld Grimké’s *Rachel*, Mary Powell Burrill’s *They That Sit in Darkness* and Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s *Mine Eyes Have Seen* defined alternatives for black woman’s identities. Directly tied to this exploration are the introduction of core values of Black Feminist Thought; women’s work within the home and outside of the home as unpaid and paid labor respectively; the power of self-defining black woman’s voice and black woman’s activism (Collins 51, 108, 219). Further, this study introduces varied black female identities to American theater. These scripts are historical containers offering recordings of black woman’s identity in early 1900’s America. Identities that exist through alternative, queered scripts reproduced more often in periodicals than in professional productions on the American theatrical stage. An analysis of these plays proves there was a developing presence in American theatre that was queer and black and feminist.

### *Brief Summary of Plays*

Grimké’s drama *Rachel* portrays an educated African American Southern family relocated to the North only to be subverted by systems of a racist Northern economy. Alice

Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, is a "blatant attempt to persuade black people to support the war" (Hull 71–72). Burrill's *They That Sit In Darkness*, confronted the problem of birth control among impoverished blacks (Gavin 13). In the Grimké and Burrill plays, black women hold the central roles and carry the message of the play. Dunbar-Nelson's script uses a multi-ethnic company to relay American patriotism with orphaned black siblings at the center. These plays are bold expressions of black identity during the onset of a new century. They are markers and timepieces of the black existence in America and can be studied as containers of black culture, history and foundations of developing Black Feminist Thought and black feminist theatrical aesthetics. The work of these women marks the early process of self-definition through the use of dramatic theater for black Americans in the U.S. In Grimké and Burrill's plays, it is directly through the bodies of Negro women, that blackness is constructed and imagined beyond the confines of American popular culture's representations of blackness - minstrelsy and blackface (Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin 103–105). In Alice Dunbar-Nelson's play, identities of blackness are reclaimed and re-presented with the help of a group of oppressed immigrant people, which serves as an effort to equate the injustices of Black Americans with the injustices of other immigrant groups.

### **“Shining a Scholarly Light: Methodologies”**

I use the theoretical lens of black feminism to analyze each play with specific attention to the lead female characters in the plays, *Rachel*, by Angelina Weld Grimké and *They That Sit in Darkness*, by Mary Powell Burrill; and to the price of American patriotism in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen*. I use the lens of queer theory to analyze the characters, the setting in which the play(s) takes place, and how the characters navigate the interior space of the

play. Finally, to understand queer space and queer time of the private domestic space I hypothesize incubated these works, I employ autoethnographic methodologies to analyze contemporary, restaged live readings of the plays by communities of queer black women. I explain this methodology in Chapter Three.

Combining Black Feminist theory and queer theory into one study places my work in conversation with the field of quare studies which seeks to use queer theory to interrogate black studies and vice versa (Johnson and Henderson 126). Quare studies adds black women to black studies and queer black women to queer studies. Critical autoethnography allows me to connect my personal experience as a black, queer, female theater director with the cultural, political, and social significance of the plays and the readings (Boylorn et al.). As a queer black feminist and a theater artist, I am able to combine the academic practices of scholarship and research with the practical uses of script analysis, dramaturgy, and creating a theatrical experience that remains true to the original presentations of the plays. This interrogation creates dramatic play analysis that is at once black and queer and feminist and is an ideal structure for analysis of these Black theater plays.

### **Need for Study**

I am adding the contributions of lesbian, black woman to the origins of the black feminist theatre aesthetic. Through writing dramatic plays, Black female playwrights challenge and redefine American Theater's stereotypes of African Americans. In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Alice Childress' *Wedding Band* dared to explore interracial love on stage. Accompanying the Black Arts Movement in the 1970's Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Committed Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, "advocated that African-American women seek

empowerment from within themselves as opposed to external affirmation from a racist, sexist society”<sup>1</sup>, while Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) portrayed a woman dealing with the “psychic dislocation that ensues when African-American . . . women in particular locate their center of power in norms and values alien to themselves, their roots, and their well-being” (Marsh-Lockett 8). These women have created cultural texts; hence, their work can be produced and made available as teaching tools to inspire and direct future generations. I mention these playwrights and their plays because there is significant scholarship on their work. The 1960’s brought a surge of curiosity into work by black female playwrights from the early 1920’s, the beginnings of the Harlem Renaissance. However my research touches the stirrings before the 1920’s, when the United States was rolling into a new century.

My research dates to the beginnings of dramatic black theater by black artists to establish a foundation for the self-defined voice and identity of black women. This dissertation continues the articulation of black feminist theatre aesthetics by examining the dramatic works of these earliest black female playwrights while marking the contributions of Burrill, Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson as queer black women. This study also offers a critical autoethnographic method of approach for examining early black plays, and stage constructions of blackness, particularly black women, as created by black women. Understanding their legacy provides a solid and more complete foundation from which to examine contemporary work by black female playwrights, Black theatre, and American Theatre.

### **Summary of Chapters**

This chapter described the need for study of Mary Powell Burrill, Angelina Weld Grimké

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and Alice Dunbar-Nelson as early thinkers/developers of Black Feminist theory and a queer black feminist theatre aesthetic. Chapter Two provides a literary overview of scholarship of theater theories and representations of blackness of the time period and the current scholarship of black female playwrights in the field of American theater with regard to Burrill, Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson. Chapter Three details my methodology, including play summaries, accounts of live readings with communities of contemporary black women to replicate the embodied practice of these plays in private spaces, and an autoethnographic review of the plays and play readings. I analyze the plays through the lens of Black Feminist theory and queer theory generating and adding to scholarship on black feminist theatre aesthetics. Chapter Four, the first of three content chapters, looks at Mary Powell Burrill's *They That Sit in Darkness* through the lens of black women's paid and unpaid labor, a key tenet of Black Feminist Thought. I argue that Burrill created an early, black feminist dramatic representation of the key tenet of black women's labor. Chapter Five analyzes Angelina Weld Grimké's play *Rachel*, as the first staged blueprint of self-defining black woman's voice through the central character of *Rachel*. In *Rachel*, I argue that Grimké's creation of the character Rachel is a development of a black woman's choice to forgo prescribed roles for black women in favor of choosing her own. How Grimké has created the environment in which Rachel comes to her decision and the character's decision-making process is both queer and black feminist. Chapter Six analyzes Alice Dunbar-Nelson's play *Mine Eyes Have Seen* as a complex example of black woman's activism in the United States and the contradictions that lie therein. Dunbar-Nelson also queers the interior space of the play and community interactions within the play. Chapter Seven combines the findings of my study and interrogates embodied practice as a viable methodological approach for re-examining, re-experiencing and re-introducing plays from this time period to contemporary black communities.

My findings also align with current arts initiatives such as the Chicago Home Theater Festival and the International Home Theater Festival. Both, just as my method of embodied practice, offer an alternative to corporation sponsored theater and art by taking art and artists into the physical homes of community.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Historical and Theoretical Foundations through Literature Review**



In the following chapter I discuss facets of Black Theatre history which led me to study representations of blackness, specifically female blackness created by three plays by three black female playwrights: *Rachel*, by Angelina Weld Grimké; *They That Sit in Darkness*, by Mary Powell Burrill and *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, by Alice Dunbar-Nelson. I discuss scholarship on two Black Theater theories; one by W.E.B. Du Bois and the second by Alain Locke, both nineteenth and twentieth century leaders in the development and ideology of Black Theatre. The products of their theories are evidenced in the works of the Harlem Renaissance, the period just after the period of my study. Next, I discuss representations of blackness in existence before and surrounding the time period, 1915-1920, of the three plays mentioned above, which are the focuses of this study. The existing representations and their histories reveal the climate in which Angelina Weld Grimké, Mary Powell Burrill and Alice Dunbar-Nelson began to write and provide a backdrop for analysis of each play's content and characters. Before concluding the chapter, I offer a look at past and present scholarship surrounding my chosen plays and playwrights to show how they are situated in the scholarship of Black Theater.

My study shines a scholarly light on the foundations of Black Theater and reveals its Black feminist foundations, which currently are largely missing from the story/history of Black Theater's development. This literature also provides a methodological framework for analysis and engaging these plays in and with a contemporary audience/community.

### **Developing Theories of Black Theatre**

The Harlem Renaissance, beginning in the 1920's and prospering through the 1930's, brought the theatrical practice of two developing and opposing theories of Black Theatre. My time frame of study, 1915-1920, holds both the beginnings of the renaissance and the remnants

of the nineteenth century making the focused timeline of my study a transitional, liminal space for Black theater development. Blackface minstrelsy was the most popular form of entertainment in the United States from 1830-1890 (Mahar; Lott; Meer). Black intellectuals questioned minstrel blackface images and representations put forth, especially in this new era of the “talented tenth”<sup>2</sup>, and the growing elite, educated and financially stable Black American. Minstrel portrayals were white constructions of blackness, which thwarted the NAACP’s efforts of presenting a new Negro to America. W.E.B. Du Bois, as editor of the NAACP publication, *Crisis*, used the magazine as a forum for presenting new, political views of Blacks that “pricked white consciousness” (Miller 67). *Crisis* is also one of the magazines that published two of the plays at the focus of this study – Angelina Weld Grimké’s *Rachel* and Alice Dunbar Nelson’s *Mine Eyes Have Seen*. A young contemporary of Du Bois, Alain Locke began developing ideas around “beauty” and “aesthetics” of Black folk culminating in his 1925 book, *The New Negro* which informed the New Negro movement also known as the Harlem Renaissance (Miller 51). Alain Locke became known for his “School of Black Experience” and W.E.B. Du Bois for the “School of Black Arts”. While Du Bois’ influence is apparent in Black theater, much of the work created during the Harlem Renaissance reflects the influence of Alain Locke.

Samuel Hay’s book *African American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis* (1994), clearly defines Black theater in two wings, one led by Du Bois and the second led by Locke. While Hay has historically traced Black Theatre, which he terms African American Theatre, to these two opposing wings of thoughts, other scholars have argued that Hay paints Du Bois and Locke as set in their views rather than in states of evolution in their exploration of the

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on ideology of the “talented tenth” see W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” from *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day* (New York, 1903).

purpose of Black theatre (Elam and Krasner 338). It is important to understand these two wings of Black theater theory because they offer insight into the climate and perspective in which Black female playwrights Angelina Weld Grimké, Mary Powell Burrill and Alice Dunbar-Nelson create black female characters on the theater stage. The importance of these works is that they are some of the earliest examples of black women writing stage identities of black women. Grimké, Burrill and Dunbar-Nelson were self-defining black, feminist voices using the theater stage.

Though similar in titles, “School of Black Experience” and “School of Black Arts”, the schools’ tenets were very different and informed the work that was created and produced in different ways. Locke’s “School of Black Experience” placed the uneducated, common Negro onstage so as to provide a reflection of the self for black audiences and communities. Locke was inspired by German theater theorist Max Reinhardt who believed the black musicals of the time, late 1800’s into the early 1900’s, represented an American folk treasure. Reinhardt convinced Locke that their portrayal, including characters with roots in stereotypes, should be preserved (Hay and American Council of Learned Societies 20). Did Reinhardt understand the stereotypes as constructed representations of black Americans by white Americans? Did Reinhardt understand these constructed representations were used to strengthen the forming systems of institutionalized racism in America? Understanding the root of the stereotypes of black Americans reveal they are not folk treasures tied to black Americans and black American created traditions but are shallow misinterpretations of an oppressed people by the oppressing class.

With Reinhardt’s influence<sup>3</sup>, Locke developed the “School of Black Experience” also

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<sup>3</sup> For further reading Alain, Locke, “Max Reinhardt Reads the Negro’s Dramatic Horoscope”, *Opportunity*, May 1924, 145.

known as “Inner Life”, which focused on theater as art and revealing the inner humanity of black male characters on stage, striving while sometimes failing to better themselves. Locke created theater and characters to illuminate the lives and characters of rural black people. He used folk tales and black cultural traditions from the black community to present staged representations of blackness. Locke created theater for consumption by black audiences but he also hoped his theater would help white people respect black traditions and culture as art and beauty.

Locke succeeded in creating identities of black men that surpassed preexisting stereotypes rooted in minstrelsy; however, identities/representations of black women remained subjugated. Locke was a teacher and helped develop the work of black male playwrights, such as, Willis Richardson and S. Randolph Edmonds, who both wrote plays that bridged the gap between Locke’s Black theater ideas and W.E.B. Du Bois’. However, black female characters were written as secondary and supportive characters. Black female characters were virtuous women who sacrificed their lives or livelihoods for the advancement of the black man’s evolution with little voice to their own experienced oppressions. While the women’s movements and black women’s movements of the Progressive era, 1890-1920, were gaining momentum, in theater plays, black female characters and black women’s issues were subjugated to those of the black male. Focusing on the social, political and financial advancement of the black male, according to Du Bois, would advance the African American race (Du Bois, *The Talented Tenth*; Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*). Black men would be equal to white men, however women, black and white would remain socially, politically and financially subjugated to all men?

Alongside the “School of Black Experience” was Du Bois’ “School of Black Arts” which is also known as a study of the “Outer Life” or the image you portray to society (Hay and American Council of Learned Societies 79). Du Bois sought to create Negro characters that were

representations of what the common Negro should aspire to become, politically active members of the Negro and American community. Du Bois' theory was directly in opposition to the white constructions of blackness on stage and on film. Du Bois saw minstrelsy as a powerful evil that needed to be thwarted. Black musicals created by blacks and with all black casts were growing in popularity but were slanted more towards entertainment rather than education. Du Bois demanded black artists seek a higher purpose than simply using the white constructions of blackness -- stereotypes of minstrelsy -- to tell a deeper story of black Americans (Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art"). He thought the routine and elementary musicals lacked the important aspect of reflection, of causing audience members to talk about and question what they had witnessed. In the ending years of the nineteenth century, Du Bois attempted to unseat the popularity of these types of musicals by creating *Star of Ethiopia* (1913), a pageant play chronicling the history of Black Americans as tied to Africans and Africa (Mitchell, "(Anti-) Lynching Plays"; Hay and American Council of Learned Societies). Du Bois wanted theater that challenged the viewer, a desire that formed his Black theater theory of theater as propaganda. Theater as propaganda relied on the "Outer Life Theory", theater that portrayed Black Americans as he believed they should be seen, intelligent educated and with values of family (Mitchell, *Living with Lynching* 126; Hay and American Council of Learned Societies 21). Du Bois created and sought to produce theater and character representations of blackness that would illuminate the lives of black people to their white persecutors. Du Bois sought to enlighten white people so that white people would stop other white people from forming and participating in lynch mobs of black people. The reigning ideas of blacks as savage, unintelligent and lacking the faculty to be contributing members of society was supported by the stereotypes of mainstream entertainment, minstrelsy and blackface. Lynch mobs claimed their violence was saving the community from

these savage, rape-prone blacks. In reality many of those lynched were successful businessmen and women, contributing community leaders who were falsely accused because white people were envious of their financial gains, property and land ownership (Mitchell, *Living with Lynching* 41).

“The importance of this “Inner Life” versus “Outer Life” debate was that it decided the extent to which theatre would be a cultural tool for gaining political and economic rights” (Hay 21). It was a matter of what face to show the white world. Black intellectuals questioned which image of a black American male to present. Some advocated for presenting one, unified image of black men, which would uplift all African Americans. Should it be the folk life of rural, hard working, salt-of-the-earth blacks or the industrious, highly educated, business-oriented, upper-echelon blacks? Both Locke and Du Bois recognized the power of theater to inform and instruct and so the theory that could gain the biggest following would sculpt the future for a unified race of Black Americans. If Locke should win, blacks would create art for black audiences/communities, which had the potential to strengthen the black community with little or no concern for approval of whites. If Du Bois should win, blacks would create theater about blacks but specifically for white audiences as a teaching tool to educate whites. Du Bois hoped that whites would then use their influence to change laws or support changing laws to promote equality for Black Americans. These two streams of Black theater remain prominent in contemporary Black theater and present themselves as 1) the Chitlin Circuit, formerly known as Theatre Owners Booking Association (T.O.B.A.) and 2) Black plays produced in the American (mainstream) LORT theaters.

### **Existing Theatrical Forms**

### *Blackface Minstrelsy*

Blackface minstrelsy was the most popular form of entertainment in the United States from post-Civil War era into the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Mahar; Lott; Meer). Scholars interrogating blackface minstrelsy situate the practice as being comprised of two components: the characters and the content. Erroll G. Hill and James V. Hatch chronicle the roots of the content of blackface minstrelsy, music, dancing jigs and comic routines/lazzi to stem from a combination of African American and Irish American traditions (Hill 93). The popularization of the characters is ascribed to two figures, Thomas Dartmouth Rice (T.D. Rice), a white male performer, and Mordecai Manuel Noah, a white male of many professions including critic and playwright. Descriptive white constructions of black women were the characters of the Mammy, a dark-skinned large bodied woman who typically worked in the white man's home as a maid, nanny and/or cook; Jezebelle the hyper-sexualized mulatto; and the Pickaninny, a parentless, black child who is unable to be educated, inherently wicked and incapable of feeling pain (Jewell, Bernstein). The images, songs and characters were traveled across the country by troupes reifying romantic notions of the happy, docile, entertaining Negro. However, as African American archival scholar Dr. Amma Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin states in a 2013 article for *The Drama Review* titled, "Lessons in Blackbody Minstrelsy: Old Plantation and the Manufacture of Black Authenticity", blackface minstrelsy began as a white construction to represent Black Americans and would later become a re-presentation (of that white construction) by Black Americans.

T.D. Rice is credited with the popularization of the character Jim Crow in the 1830's (Kootin; "Jim Crow, American — T. D. Rice, W. T. Lhamon, Jr. | Harvard University Press"; Hill).

“He was not the first American comic to perform in blackface, but he was by far the most popular of his time, touring both America and England to great acclaim. His "Jim Crow" character, first performed by Rice in Louisville in 1828, was a stable slave who sang a "negro ditty" titled "Jump Jim Crow". The song, always performed with a heavy black accent, included the lyrics, "Turn about and wheel about, and do just so / and every time I turn about I jump Jim Crow." As a result of the popularity of Rice's performances, "Jim Crow" became a generic term for many other white comedians' blackface portrayals of slaves, and the namesake of laws mandating racial segregation long after Rice's death” (“Thomas D. Rice”) (<http://www.nndb.com/people/275/000203663/>).

Jim Crow performances were so popular that these constructions of blackness were taken as truth such that “...audiences expected any person with dark skin, no matter what their background, to conform to one or more of the stereotypes: Jim Crow, Zip Coon, Mammy, Uncle Tom, Buck, Jezebel, Mulatto or Pickaninny” (“Blackface! - The History of Racist Blackface Stereotypes”).

The second figure that popularized these constructions of blackness did so not through performing but through writing. Hay credits Mordecai Manuel Noah as “the father of Negro minstrelsy”(Hay and American Council of Learned Societies 13) because of his studied observations and written description/critique of the plays being performed at the first black company of record which began in New York City in 1821, William Brown’s African Grove Tea-Garden. An English actor Charles Matthews later brought Noah’s written descriptions to life as blackface characters in England. Noah, as “...the sheriff of New York City, ...a judge, consul, politician, playwright, critic, and the editor of the powerful *National Advocate* newspaper” received an invitation to the first show of the company and used the opportunity to defamatorily



write about his experiences. Noah hoped his gross characterizations of an uncivilized black man would influence a vote against allowing black men, with specific financial holdings, to vote. The vote would be cast in the 1821 New York State constitutional convention (Hay and American Council of Learned Societies 6). “Close readings of Noah’s reviews of the African Grove Tea-Garden and the African Grove Theatre show that Noah extracted the images he parodied from carefully selected aspects of real African American life” (Hay and American Council of Learned Societies 16).

Noah’s reasoning for writing these reviews with a particular slant to portraying the black man within narrow constructions -- buffoonery, laziness, unreliable, subhuman -- was because he understood, just as Du Bois and Locke did, the power of portrayal to inform perception. Black men (and women) were earning advanced university degrees, owning properties and businesses and raising families, all of which deemed blacks as contributing members of society. At the time, as contributing members of society, the black community expected equality under the law. However there remained whites reluctant to relinquish or share power with blacks. The 1821 vote in New York allowing black men with special financial holdings to vote, was a threatening step toward all black men, white women and black women being able to vote. In 1821 the number of blacks with significant financial holdings able to vote outnumbered the voting whites, leading to the right to vote for all black men and power to change laws favoring equality of all men. Noah was against black men having the right to vote and used the scathing reviews he had written to convince white voters for the 1821 convention that blacks were uncivilized and should not have the right to vote no matter their financial holdings (Hay and American Council of Learned Societies 7). Noah understood the power of stage representations of blackness and he used them to his political advantage.

The performances of T.D. Rice and the reviews of Mordacai Noah aided the popularization of the characters of blackface minstrelsy. For scholarship on the content of blackface minstrelsy I turn to, *A History of African American Theatre* printed by Cambridge University Press (2003) edited by scholars Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch. Hatch presents minstrelsy as a cultural fusion of Irish and African dance and song.

“...the Irish found themselves living in urban slums with Blacks, some of whom had come from the Caribbean but most of whom were either northern freedmen or “contraband slave” escaped from the South. Blacks and Irish shared a love of music, dance and verbal virtuosity. The Irish soon appropriated black music and dance, and Blacks returned the compliment by learning to jig and to sing Irish songs” (Hatch 93).

According to Hatch, what began as a fusion of Irish and African came to be solely recognized as a representation of the ol’ plantation southern “darky”, pairing song, dance and dialect through characters such as Jim Crow and foppery through the character negro who has “risen above his station” concerned only with his clothing, Jim Dandy<sup>4</sup>. Jigs, songs, and comedic sketches combined to form the content of minstrel shows. The physical body of the Irish ethnicity was removed, leaving the black body as the focus. The physical black body at this time was forbidden on many of the playing stages leaving a void filled by white actors donning burnt cork makeup to construct the black body, dancing, singing and as the target of comedic sketches. Black Americans would later take to performing and re-presenting these characters in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Their efforts would add depth and humanity to the stereotypes, but playing the stereotype would also lead to entrapment, limiting their acting careers (“Blackface! -

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<sup>4</sup> (Hill)

The History of Racist Blackface Stereotypes”). The roots of the minstrel show content, created in solidarity between equally impoverished ethnic groups, contribute to an understanding of the evolution of constructions of blacks by whites and how the images, carried along by the traveling minstrel show, spread in popularity.

Jim Crow, Jim Dandy, Topsy (from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), Zip Coon, Mr. Tambo, Mammy were some of the characters performed in minstrel shows. Minstrel shows combined white constructions of Black Americans (characters) with black and Irish songs, jigs and sketch comedy (content) and traveled the United States entertaining northern whites and mixed audiences of southern blacks and/or whites. Northern whites were often curious about southern blacks, and southern blacks viewing an all black minstrel troupe, a phenomenon formed in the latter nineteenth century, had the rare opportunity to see black performers onstage. Minstrel shows were entertainment as well as schools of cultural learning for their audiences.

*Representations of black women from the two theories of Black theater of the time*

To offer a review of this literature of Black theater in the 1920’s and 1930’s of the time period I turn to some of the popular plays and playwrights within each developing school of theater. In the “School of Black Art” some of Locke’s preferred playwrights were Willis Richardson and S. Randolph Edmonds. Richardson’s *The Idle Head*, was written in 1924, after the time period of my focus, however, it is a marker of the types of roles available for Black women. I use these works as signifiers of what was available as comparison to the works of Angelina Weld Grimké, Mary Powell Burrill, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. Edmonds’ *The Bad Man* (1934) posits the Black female as a site of sex, a site of the unsolicited desire of a white boss, prompting the leading black male character to defend her virtuosity. *House of Sham* (1929)

by Richardson posits the black female as a virtuous and sacrificial supporting character to the evolution of the play's central character, a black man. To their credits, both Edmonds and Richardson wrote successfully bridging the gap between the School of Black Art (Du Bois theory) and the School of Black Experience (Locke theory) by creating leading male characters with elements of the "trouble-loving type [man] disliked by Du Bois and the heroic figure that bored Locke" (Hay and American Council of Learned Societies).

In the "School of Black Experience" lay the work of Du Bois. His *Star of Ethiopia* (1913), showing African Americans as seminal figures of history and powerful African ancestry left black women as archetypes, images, statuesque beings to be admired and aspired to, but held no voice recognizable to the audience/community of the time. Du Bois' pageant plays were designed to display the historical connection between Africans and blacks as a source of racial uplift. Du Bois sought to connect a formerly enslaved people with a past that, through slavery, had been denied to them. Du Bois' style was of a pageant play, built of and for spectacle, requiring hundreds of people playing characters and additional live musicians. The characters within the plays served as reminders of the black communal and ancestral connection to the great inventors, intellectuals, kings and queens of Africa. The characters were to be revered as the very best of black history which was awe inspiring but less of a reflection of the turn of the century black community (Hay and American Council of Learned Societies 79).

### **A Review of the Work of Grimké, Burrill and Dunbar-Nelson**

Angelina Weld Grimké's, Mary Powell Burrill's, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson's plays can be found in a limited number of theatre anthologies about Black women playwrights (Allen; Marsh-Lockett; Perkins; Perkins and Stephens; Hull) but they are all better known as poets. In

libraries their work is listed as literature rather than as play texts. This is also due to the limited number of documented professional productions and that the plays were distributed as printed literature in periodicals. Harry Elam Jr.'s *African American Theater Performance and History* though extensive, only dedicates a small area in which Black women playwrights are named. Henry D. Miller in *Theorizing Black Theater: Art vs. Propaganda*, gives a harsh critique of *Rachel*, owing a flawed play to the inexperience of the playwright. He attributes the production failure of *Rachel* to a faulty dramatic structure. He writes that the conflict is in the mind of the protagonist and therefore the other characters are unnecessary and the play might best be read as a piece of literature,

"a strong case can be made that stories of protagonists whose principal conflicts lie in their own minds, stories in which motivating events are in a distant past, and stories that achieve life – altering meanings only in the protagonist's thoughts are, in fact, stories better told in biographical or fictional literature" (Miller 46).

Elam and Krasner note Grimké's play as the impetus for the Du Bois and Locke debate, which revealed their ideological differences around the purpose of theater. Unable to resolve their differences Locke resigned from the NAACP play contest committee and began Howard University's theater program, later known for its development of the "Inner Life" training for the actor and playwright development. Little merit is given to *Rachel* as creating a model of its own for supporting ideals leading to the empowerment of black women. In the late 1980's and early 1990's black female theater scholars give focus to Angelina Weld Grimké, Mary Powell Burrill and Alice Dunbar-Nelson as writers during the Harlem Renaissance even though they were writing before it began. Gloria T. Hull's *Color, Sex and Poetry: Three Women Playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance* (1987) "... Hull provides the most substantial critique of *Rachel*" (Gavin)

and a considerable amount of scholarship on the life of Dunbar-Nelson. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's *Their Place on the Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America* (1990), features Mary Powell Burrill and Angelina Weld Grimké, "includes brief discussions on several female playwrights active during the Harlem Renaissance..."(Gavin). Kathy A. Perkins' *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays Before 1950* (1990), dedicates a chapter to Mary Powell Burrill and *They That Sit in Darkness* is reprinted here. "Although Perkins does not include Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* in her anthology, she discusses the play and the public's reaction to its political nature" (Gavin). Kathy A. Perkins' and Judith Stephens' *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women* (1998), identifies Angelina Weld Grimké and Mary Powell Burrill as female playwrights who wrote plays about lynching. Perkins and Stephens published Mary Powell Burrill's *Aftermath* and Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel*. For both Mary Powell Burrill and Angelina Weld Grimké, *Strange Fruit* offers a brief analysis of how the plays were received after production. Carol P. Marsh-Lockett focuses on Angelina Weld Grimké's life and her only other play *Mara*, also a lynching play, in her essay, "Mara, Angelina Grimké's Other Play and the Problems of Recovering Texts" in her book *Black Women Playwrights: Visions on the American Stage* (1999). Still absent from this survey of Burrill's, Grimké's and Dunbar-Nelson's work is a dramatic analysis of their works as foundational to a burgeoning queer black feminist theatre aesthetic.

Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century of scholarship on black female playwrights, Carol Allen's *Peculiar Passages: Black Women Playwrights, 1875 To 2000*, (2005) lists Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* as "racial uplift". Patricia Young's article "Shackled: Angelina Weld Grimké", places *Rachel* among the lynching plays written by black women in protest of the terrorism of Blacks (Young).

Angelina Weld Grimké, offers a critique of her text in *Competitor I* (January 1920) entitled: “'Rachel' The Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis by the Author” in which she explains that she wrote the piece to reach white women who might better assuage the violence against Black people, in particular Black men.

Less is written about Mary Powell Burrill’s script, *They That Sit in Darkness*, I surmise, because there is no record of professional production. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory dedicated a chapter to Mary Powell Burrill in her book *Their Place on the Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America*. Brown-Guillory marks Mary Powell Burrill as an active writer of the Harlem Renaissance. Critiqued by Doris E. Abramson, *They That Sit in Darkness*, “share[ed] a concern for children, the future of the race”, with Angelina Weld Grimké’s *Rachel*. Nellie McKay marks Mary Powell Burrill as a prominent writer of the Harlem Renaissance but goes further to discuss the topic of reproductive rights within the play. ““Unlike wealthier women, poor Black women do not have access to health care and information concerning birth control; they must rely on tax-supported health agencies, which participate in the suppression of health information” (Gavin 17).

Alice Dunbar-Nelson is known as the wife of poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar and an accomplished poet of the Harlem Renaissance. Her plays, including *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, and her life is discussed healthily in Gloria Hull’s *Color, Sex and Poetry: Three Women Playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance* (1987). Hull’s book also places Dunbar-Nelson in relation to Angelina Weld Grimké because Hull analyzes both women. Hull’s account is extensive about the lives of Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson. She offers the foundation for how their creative lives possibly touched one another. In this study I take Hull’s work a step further by adding Burrill, and placing all three queer black female playwrights and their work in relation to each other.

Several crossovers in the lives of these three playwrights give me reason to join Angelina Weld Grimké, Mary Powell Burrill and Alice Dunbar-Nelson in this study. All three published in periodicals, were college-educated and pursued and/or held teaching assignments in the Washington D.C. area; all three attended the same writing group; all three created representations of Blackness which refuted stereotypes of the time; and all three were women who loved women. Mary Powell Burrill and Angelina Weld Grimké both taught at M Street School (Dunbar High School) in Washington D.C. (Perkins; Anderson). M Street School was also a place of initial productions for Angelina Weld Grimké and Mary Powell Burrill. Angelina Weld Grimké, born in Massachusetts migrated with her family to Washington D.C. which became a site for creation of many lynching plays (Mitchell, “(Anti-)Lynching Plays”; Perkins and Stephens). The intimate connection between Angelina Weld Grimké and Mary Powell Burrill is traced in their loving letters to one another and in Angelina Weld Grimké’s poetry. The poetry, diaries and letters of Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Angelina Weld Grimké have been explored extensively as lesbian literature and in the disciplines of women and gender studies (Zimmerman 458). However as playwrights their work has had limited analysis as having a queer Black Feminist theatre aesthetic.

The years of these publications, 1915 – 1920, set a five-year time frame in which I focus the analysis of this study. However it is important to give context to those five years and those publications by mentioning the happenings of Black theater and performance of blackness at the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century before 1915.

My contribution to the existing literature on Black studies, in particular Black theatre studies, is an analysis of the self-defining constructions of black woman created by Burrill, Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson. By self-defining I mean black women writing black women



characters. To deepen the importance of these black female playwrights constructing black female characters with other black women via the writing group and as black women writing from their own experience of living in America. Their work dismantles the stereotypes of the asexual Mammy, the hypersexual Jezebel and the pickaninny. It is through newly constructed black female characters that other constructions of blackness are investigated, challenged, and unwritten.

### **Black Feminist Theory**

Black feminism was born out of a desire for black women to address issues of their lived experiences and explore/develop a collective voice that existed outside the confines of the dominant group (Johnson and Henderson 4). The feminist movement, while initially supported by many women of color, proved to be a movement that placed black women's concerns as tertiary to social and political justice for white women and black men. Black feminist thought places the experiences of black women at the center of the analysis without being in comparison to or considered an outcropping of white feminism (Collins; Anderson; Smith). Therefore in this dissertation, primary sources will be black feminists. I use black feminists who venture to foster black women's empowerment by centering of black woman's lived experience. I use Black feminist theory because it is a source for black woman's collective restoration of voice and of a self-defined viewpoint of lived experience that is simultaneously one's own, socially engaged and politically driven.

### **Conclusion**

I am restoring the contributions of early queer black female playwrights to history by shining a scholarly light on plays by Mary Powell Burrill, Angelina Weld Grimké, and Alice

Dunbar-Nelson. In doing so I restore the contributions of queer black woman to the origins of queer black feminist theatre aesthetics. This aesthetic is only beginning to be articulated in a scholarly way. This dissertation seeks to continue the articulation of Black feminist theatre aesthetics by examining the dramatic works of these earliest black female playwrights.

Understanding their legacy provides a solid and more complete foundation from which to examine contemporary work by black female playwrights, Black theatre, and American Theatre.

My study extends the literary conversation of Burrill, Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson's work to the fields of black studies, in particular black theater studies, queer studies and black feminist studies to begin to outline a queer black feminist theatre aesthetic. I specifically add to the work begun by Lisa Anderson by unearthing these texts as initial foundations of a queer black theatre aesthetic. These foundations exist not only within the plays but also in the avenues of distribution that placed the plays directly in the hands of the communities for which they were written.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

## Overview of Methods

This chapter outlines my use of Black feminist theory, queer theory and critical autoethnography to analyze the three sections of my data: 1) the plays; 2) live readings by communities of black women; and 3) autoethnographic writings on the plays and the live readings. I use Black Feminist theory to shine a scholarly light on Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel*, Mary Powell Burrill's *They That Sit in Darkness*, and Alice Dunbar Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen*. To each play I apply a core theme of Black Feminist theory to establish that each play has core themes of Black feminist theory. Identifying core themes of Black Feminist theory is the first step to classifying each play as an early example of a Black Feminist theatre aesthetic. The second step is noting the play setting, which for each play is the interior living/dining room of a small apartment, a key location in Black Feminist plays. How the characters use the space is a marker of these writers exercising a queer use of time and space. Identifying the setting informed my location choice for the live readings with communities of black women, the second section of my data. The autoethnographic account of both the play scripts and the live readings brings the plays and their content into a contemporary and yet new context of theatre-making. This revived context of theatre-making focuses on exploring the play script in small intimate groups and private settings which aid discussion and reflection; as opposed to an exploration focused on a future production. In my research the reading and post-reading discussion *is* the production.

Identifying these plays as early examples of a queer black feminist theatre aesthetic fulfills my research agenda of restoring the contributions of lesbian Black woman to the origins of Black/American theater. In creating this analytical lens using core themes of Black Feminist theory, queer theory, live play readings with communities of black women and autoethnographic

reflections, I created a method of analysis that echoes their original inception and dissemination. This method is appropriate to the material itself.

## **Data**

### *The Plays and Black Feminist Theatre Aesthetic*

Black Feminist theatre aesthetic is a theatre critique that applies theories of race and feminism to create a platform for dramatic analysis of written and/or performed work that centers on the black female experience. Black Feminist theatre aesthetic is a framework for dramatic critique with roots in Black Feminist Thought, a theory of knowledge creation recognizing the unique positionality of black woman's experience. Black Feminist theory, however, is not grounded in theatre or the performing arts, thus Black Feminist theatre aesthetic applies the ideas of Black Feminist theory to dramatic theatre. By expanding Black Feminist theory in this way, I expand the positionality of a black woman's experience, to the creative realm of art, theatre and performance. Practitioners of this aesthetic – Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, Sharon Bridgeforth, Lisa M. Anderson to name a few -- believe, a black woman's experiences generate knowledge offering a re-articulation of not only black woman's identity but of identities of blackness (Omi; Collins) regardless of gender. By using Black Feminist aesthetic, I identify portions of identity and knowledge creation generated within early plays by black female playwrights. Black Feminist aesthetic practitioner, Lisa M. Anderson in her book *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* identifies the "core" of a Black Feminist aesthetic as "...playwrights, directors, performance artist, and scholars who, intentionally or not, blend the core values and aesthetics of Black feminism with their art and scholarship. Like black feminism itself, the origins of a theater that we might call both black and feminist extend back to the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth" (Anderson 1). I focus on the ways in which Angelina Weld

Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Mary Powell Burrill created theatrical reconstructions of historical stage representations of blackness and of black identity. In this study, Black Feminist thought is an additional framework for analysis of black feminist theatre aesthetics within *Rachel, They That Sit in Darkness* and *Mine Eyes Have Seen*.

Black Feminist aesthetics, which has a community focus as a tenet informed the setting of the live readings with communities of Black women. A critique using Black Feminist aesthetic also offers a unique view of community and identity formed in the private spaces of home and family. I must stress that these plays existed in periodical publications, and they were likely read in homes, which is important because of the content within the plays. The content addresses social injustices against blacks including incidents of being falsely accused leading to lynching of family members. In the early 1900's, publicly addressing racial injustices, especially lynching, was to endanger your life and the life of your family. However in the private spaces and among communities of black people acts of resistance could be invented and rehearsed. Rehearsal of identities of blackness through community readings of plays created by Black female playwrights, is an opportunity to practice a constructed identity (R. Bernstein, loc 241). In Black Feminist aesthetic this is called an embodied practice (Mitchell, *Living with Lynching* 14; Hagood 278) of resistance. In the plays of this study black identities created by black women were created to benefit the black community. Burrill, Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson offered alternate identities to white constructions of blackness and a way to rehearse those identities in the private spaces of home and among community.

“In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection” (Lorde 114). This quote from

Black Feminist scholar and poet Audre Lorde describes the work of Angelina Weld Grimké, Mary Powell Burrill and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. Women wrote with language familiarity and manners of the oppressor or the oppressive force at the time, a European play structure; exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement. This oppressive force also included issues of Black men's issues holding priority to issues of black women. They wrote in a form that was acceptable and comparable to white stage plays of the period. In addition, a Black Feminist aesthetic using written dialect, music and issues of community valued a reconstructed black history and black identity. Through readings and performances of these plays, these black female playwrights allowed the readers and audience to experience and embody a variety of black persons stretching beyond white constructed stereotypes and added a full-bodied representation/identity of black woman. "This "watching" generates a dual consciousness in African – American women, one in which black women are able to develop and veil "...a self – defined standpoint from the prying eyes of dominant groups" (Collins 107).

As a final word on the importance of a Black Feminist Aesthetic I quote author Lisa M. Anderson, from her book *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*,

...as the black aesthetic attempted to remove gender from a codified authentic blackness or black experience, feminist theory and aesthetics imagined a female identity uncomplicated by race or class. Feminist dramatic theory and criticism, while not necessarily attempting to create a monolithic feminist theory, approached theater and drama from the perspective of the white, middle-class woman, much as the second wave feminist focused on the experiences of white, middle-class women. Because both of these aesthetics excluded the possibility (and the work of) a black feminist aesthetic, it became necessary for black

feminist literary critics to develop a black feminist aesthetic. Now it is necessary to outline an aesthetic of black feminist drama performance (Anderson 2).

In the final chapter of her book Anderson summarizes “aesthetics” as elements within the text that pertain to a specific history, politics or community ideals (Anderson 115).

*Live readings by communities of black women - Embodied Practice*

“By embodied practice, I mean any bodily act that conveys meaning...Embodied practices can include speaking or singing, grimacing or gesturing, hugging or hitting, reading a script dramatically or performing in full costume...knowledge’s and identities are preserved and generated as much through mundane practices of everyday life as through formal theater” (Mitchell, “(Anti-)Lynching Plays” 5). In this study, embodied practice is a live reading and post-reading discussion of one or more of my chosen plays in a group setting with women participating as characters and/or listeners/witnesses.

Koritha Mitchell in her book, *Living With Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930*, explores two of the plays in my study, *Rachel* and *Mine Eyes Have Seen* as “lynching” dramas. “... lynching drama put forth not only representative individuals and families but also key figures: the black soldier, black lawyer, and black mother/wife” (Mitchell, *Living with Lynching* 15). Mitchell posits that because these plays were published in periodicals, it allowed private homes to become arenas for performance-- hence the embodied practice of new archetypes-- within the safety of private spaces. In these private spaces, blacks could discuss, interact with and challenge “the violence that the scripts critique” (Mitchell, *Living with Lynching* 15). The second part of my research design is an embodied practice of gathering to take up roles and read the play aloud as a group, followed by discussion. It is embodied because as the members of the group read the roles they are choosing



to enact and portray their impressions of these characters written at the beginning of the twentieth century. By reading aloud in a group, the members are embodying a portrayal of history as written by Black women of the time period. Just as communities reading these plays in the original time period could embody self-defined portrayals of blackness that were unavailable in the mainstream, current readers are able to embody black history and black experience missing from the dominant culture's historical account.

I facilitated three live readings with communities of queer black women. A group of queer black women in Baltimore, Maryland gathered on two separate occasions to read, *They That Sit in Darkness* by Mary Powell Burrill and *Mine Eyes Have Seen* by Alice Dunbar Nelson. The Honey Pot Performance ensemble in Chicago, Illinois gathered to read *Rachel* by Angelina Weld Grimké. Each event happened over one evening while partaking in food and drink. I audio recorded the post-reading discussions while taking handwritten notes. I used the audio recording to write summarizing reviews of the readings and discussions.

In the readings with the group of women in Baltimore, Maryland I remained an observer, only speaking to offer questions as discussion prompts. At the reading with the Chicago Performance Group Honey Pot, I allowed myself to join the discussion as a professional colleague asking questions and offering critique. Both experiences resulted in a need and desire within me to continue this way of working, doing readings of plays by black female playwrights in private settings, as a theater director. I believe this to be a valid and necessary avenue of approach to creating and enacting new ideas for a sustainable, contemporary black theater.

#### *Autoethnographic writing on the plays and live readings*

In this section I offer negotiations of my experiences of the play scripts and the live readings as a queer black feminist, black woman, and director of theater. I report on the content

of the post-reading discussion, the mood, and events of the reading itself. I also engage the scripts personally giving an account of my expectations in reading the play and including it in my study. The event of live readings and post-reading discussions inform my process as a director. The practice of these live readings has changed how I believe theater should be produced. The success of these readings, the feedback I received from the participants, opened my eyes as a director to how theater, in particular Black theater can be produced and presented to black audiences.

### **Theoretical Tools**

As Anderson says, “a black feminist aesthetic requires an investigation of the text themselves...”. In my research, an investigation of the text also benefits from an investigation of the text as embodied by community participants in the arena of home. The combination of textual investigation using tenets of Black Feminist theatre aesthetics and queer theory and the practical application of embodying the text, places my study in conversation with previous scholarship of the affect of these plays in the communities in which they were read. This study is a contribution to a small but growing field of Black Feminist theatre aesthetic while creating an additional field of theater study and practice – a queer black feminist theatre aesthetic – which expands into new ideas for what theater production looks like.

Community readings of the plays within the home were possible because the plays were printed in periodicals. The common order of going from the playwright’s mind to the written page and then to the stage was altered. The new order was from the playwright’s pen to the community, wherein the community decided the roles and performances. Historical evidence of professional and/or community productions for the work of Mary Powell Burrill and Alice

Dunbar-Nelson is extremely limited, and Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* only received three productions in its own time and only one in the latter half of the twentieth century. The magazines in which they were printed boast high subscriptions numbers, which strongly suggests that the plays were read or heard, by more people than could attend, or afford to attend, a professional performance. In 1919, the year *Mine Eyes Have Seen* was published, *the Crisis* magazine boasted sales of over 100,000 production (Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. DuBois a Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*). *The Birth Control Review*, which published Burrill's play in 1919, had a slower, but still substantial, growth rate reaching 10,000 copies by 1922 ("The Public Papers of Margaret Sanger: Web Edition"). Through distribution in periodicals, the number of readers can be multiplied by how many times the publication was read aloud to a group of listeners and/or passed along to another family. These readings are a type of theatre production that created a queer and communal space that matches the queer and communal spaces within the plays.

*Text analysis using Black Feminist theory and Embodied Practice*

My framework has four steps. The first is my own entry into the plays and the history that lies within the text through a close reading of the text guided by the aforementioned tenets of a Black Feminist aesthetic. "...The transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation..." (Lorde 40). While reading the plays, I search for the voice of the black female. Within the text the queer black female voice is not solely in the black and female characters but also in characters regardless of gender, age, or ethnicity because the creators are black and female and queer. Yes, each character has its own personality but each represents a point of view of the queer, black woman because each character is written through and/or because of the experiences of the playwright. Each character is the voice of the playwright. The representation

of voice is specifically of interest because black women are at the center of these plays. Black women are at the center, and we encounter the world (of the play) through their eyes as the key generators of knowledge and lived experience. In close readings, I analyze the text as a single reader, which places the play scripts outside of the developing theories of Black theater of the time when women served as sites of sex or sites in need of rescue. Black women characters were present in the early plays of Black theater but remained largely voiceless, and their bodies served primarily as the impetus for a black man to make a change to advance his personal, social or political standing. Black women were also sites of sacrifice, in that they would sacrifice themselves or place themselves in danger to hide or support the black man's growth<sup>5</sup>. Black women were side stories to the real issue -- the physical and/or spiritual advancement of the Black male -- an idea supported and popularized by W.E.B. Du Bois in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*. It is important to account for the historical context in which these plays were written and distributed. To research this theatre history I relied on the scripts as textual evidence, characters as representations of blackness, production histories, if any, including critics reviews, playwright responses to their own text and its reception, where available, and the periodicals in which they were published.

In *They That Sit in Darkness*, playwright Mary Powell Burrill transforms the stereotyped images of "mammy" and "Jezebel" in the mother character of Malinda Jasper and Lindy Jasper respectively. Angelina Weld Grimké in *Rachel* transforms the role of woman through her title character while also creating reconstructed images of the black man and dispelling the myth of the unfeeling pickaninny/black child. The characters of *Rachel* and all these plays allowed readers to challenge such roles as Mammy, Uncle Tom, the hypersexual savage male and the

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<sup>5</sup> My play analysis of Willis Richardson's *The Idle Head* (1929) and S. Randolph Edwards' *The Bad Man* (1934)

feminine equivalent Jezebel. Grimké's new characters offered nuanced constructions of blackness that were different in tone of voice and intellect. The locations of the action; the private spaces of home, were also different than existing theatrical presentations of blackness. These characters were also written in relation to a greater community. Placing black female and male characters in relation to a greater community established black citizenship, which was an idea that sat in opposition to how the dominant culture presented blackness. Keep in mind that black men, although not favorably represented, had a presence in dominant culture's representations, whereas black women were largely absent. In *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, Alice Dunbar-Nelson uses a black male's dilemma upon being drafted for World War II as a platform to stitch the Black American story into the patriotic quilt of American immigrants. She crafts a story that exonerates the victims of a mob lynching while representing the Black family and their sacrifice of life and freedom as tantamount to sacrifices made by all immigrants, all those who make up the very fabric of the United States.

These plays have limited productions in which to engage an audience, but because of their publication in periodicals in the first decade of the twentieth century, they created alternate opportunities for community engagement. Readings in the private spaces such as homes and church meetinghouses enabled black Americans an opportunity to practice refined and reconstructed identities of blackness in the early twentieth century. Because these plays were written and submitted to play contests within periodicals and very likely read in private spaces, my research benefits from including readings of the text, which is the embodied practice section of my study.

To facilitate the embodied practice, I prepared a list of questions to prompt post-reading discussions of the text and its characters, storyline, events and themes among the group. I

listened for how the account of history was experienced, learned and debated. The embodied practice requires two roles, the listener or witness and the storyteller. As each person takes up a character or reads a role they become both, storyteller and witness. In this embodied practice, I, as director and reader of stage directions, observed how and what changes presented from the beginning of the reading through to the finish and into the discussion. As the director I am the listener or witness to the (re)telling of an event. As these plays were written when lynching of blacks was a prominent practice of mobs comprised of white people, some of the events within my particular plays deal with immense and traumatic violence against black people. "Since trauma invades conscious understanding, memory becomes encoded on a bodily level and resurfaces as possession. According to trauma experts such as Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk, the survivor relives the original experience through a body memory yet struggles to find words for an experience that exceeds representation" (Griffiths 1). While Griffiths is specifically relating to trauma studies and psychoanalysis, I translate "body memory" to apply to the collective memory, to the communal memory associated with Black Feminist theory explained earlier in this chapter. The embodied practice of reading these plays during the era they were written allowed for community members to "... preserve the truth these myths [stereotyped constructions of blackness] disregarded. They portray black characters leading ordinary lives in domestic interiors where they affectionately sustain each other" (Mitchell, 2, *Living with Lynching*). Griffiths explains trauma as a severing event that separates in the survivor the body from the voice. By telling the event to another -- a witness -- the body of the witness becomes the site of memory, rejoining what was once severed (Griffiths 1). In 1915-1920 when these plays were written, reading them in private spaces with storytellers and witnesses was an act of rejoining the severed voice to the body. Once again, because of how history has developed

through an often violently embodied practice, we are rejoining the severed body -- Black history -- as told by black women, to the voice, and to our active twenty first century voices. A suppressed and silenced history is given voice and body through an embodied expression of collective memory. "Embodied practice as an episteme and a praxis, a way of knowing as well as a way of storing and transmitting cultural knowledge and identity" (Taylor 278).

### **Critical Framework for Analysis**

Each of the three content chapters uses the following framework to analyze a representative play by each of the three Black female playwrights who are the subjects of this dissertation. Each chapter begins with a "Synopsis and Preliminary Analysis". This opening section offers the reader an in depth synopsis of the play using a Black Feminist lens and a queer lens to analyze space and time. In this section, I also comment on content within the play that deserves further analysis but lies outside the scope of this dissertation. Following "Synopsis and Preliminary Analysis" is a section applying one core theme of Black Feminist theory as a primary analytical lens to the play. In "Black Feminist Theory Core Theme Analysis" I describe in detail the character(s) who exemplifies this theme, their role(s) within the play and how that character interacts exemplifies or challenges the core Black Feminist theme. Next I give a thick descriptive account of the live readings by a community of black women. I report on their experience of the play readings, the content of the post-play reading discussions, and the feedback from the groups. Finally, I add my experience of the event from my own intersections of black, queer, female, director of theater in an effort to understand how I, with all of my intersections, received these plays written in the early 1900's. At the conclusion of every chapter

I summarize how I understand this play as rooted in Black Feminism and the live readings by communities of black women as a unique contribution to theatre analysis.



**Chapter 4**  
***Work, Family and Black Women's Oppression in "They That Sit In Darkness: A One-Act  
Play of Negro Life"***

Written in 1919, *They That Sit in Darkness* is a one-act play published in *The Birth Control Review* (1919), a monthly periodical, “Dedicated to Voluntary Motherhood” (“The Birth Control Review Archives”). *The Birth Control Review*, a print publication from 1918 to 1940, was published and edited by Margaret Sanger, a social reformer and activist for birth control until 1928. The article following the play was “Is Birth Control Immoral?” (“The Birth Control Review Archives”), which quotes men speaking against equality, specifically reproductive equality for Black women. *They That Sit in Darkness* acts as the initial platform for critical discussion of the issue for the remaining articles of the publication.

*They That Sit in Darkness* is a well-constructed piece of Black feminist playwriting successfully combining the Black theater theories of W.E.B. Du Bois’ race propaganda and Alain Locke’s black rural folk life. Burrill uses traditional European play structure of exposition, rising action, climax and falling action to tell the story of a black rural family in an eight-page one-act play. The setting, inside the central living space of a home, is one marker of a black feminist and queer theatre aesthetic. In eight-pages, Burrill portrays the inequality of reproductive rights for black rural women through the representative life of black rural women. There is power in black women’s voices and in black women defining, through writing and performance, their own identities. This analysis presents black women’s playwriting as an alternative site of knowledge creation and the playwrights as early practitioners of Black Feminist theory and queer theory.

This chapter analyzes Mary Powell Burrill’s play, *They That Sit in Darkness* using the following core theme of Black Feminist Thought from Patricia Hill Collins: Work, Family, and Black Women’s Oppression (Collins 51). I provide this analysis to demonstrate the presence of Black Feminist Thought and to present Mary Powell Burrill as an early developer and

practitioner of Black Feminist thought and ideals. I use one of the core themes of Black Feminist Thought -- Work, Family, and Black Women's Oppression -- to compile an analysis of the two black female leads of the play; Mrs. Jasper, the mother, and Lindy, the daughter.

A detailed synopsis with preliminary analysis of the play's text and themes give a scene-by-scene summary of the play including stage directions. I offer a landscape of the characters and themes including an introduction to the black female characters in primary focus of this study. *They That Sit in Darkness* did not receive a professional production in the time period of its inception; therefore I narrowed this section to include the sparsely documented history of its community productions. I include these because black plays existed in the margins of mainstream theater and should not be evaluated on the same scale of success as the mainstream theater. The absence of documentation adds to the significance of this study and its contribution to the field of Black feminist studies of and in theatre. Next is an account of the live readings with a community of black women in Baltimore, Maryland, followed by my autoethnographic account of both the live reading and my experience of the play script as a queer, black, female, director of theater.

### **Synopsis and Preliminary Analysis**

*They That Sit in Darkness* begins with stage directions that mark the action as passing "in a small country town in the South in our own day". The central location is described as the central room in a small, poor dwelling and "does a three fold duty as kitchen, dining room, and living room for the Jasper family"(1). This description immediately queers the space of the play. In the dominant white culture there is a separation between work and family (Collins 53). Burrill sets the world of this black family apart by noting the "three fold duty" of the central space. I add

and redefine that the room is three fold as the place of the family, the workplace and childbirth. The central space is where Mrs. Jasper earns money as a washerwoman, it is also the space where the family gathers for meals and storytelling, and finally it is possibly the place of childbirth. Three spaces that muddy demarcation lines between home life, work and childbirth. I mark this conflation of space as queer and mark the living conditions of the black family as queer, lying outside the norms of the dominant culture. I replicate elements of this queer space with multiple uses within the play in the live reading where a living room triples as a dining room and a stage; and those in attendance quadruple as guests, actors, witnesses and listeners.

There is a door to the side yard through which can be seen “a glimpse of snowy garments waving and glistening in the sun” (1). The first two characters we see are women, “Melinda Jasper, a frail, tired looking woman of thirty-eight, and Lindy, her seventeen year old daughter” they are “bending over tubs” hand washing laundry. We hear the “constant cries of children at play” (1), five of the remaining six Jasper children, from the side yard.

All character dialogue is written in a Southern dialect except for the character of Miss. Elizabeth Shaw, “a visiting nurse” from Massachusetts. In the first spoken lines between the two lead female characters we understand that the mother, Mrs. Jasper, has newly delivered a baby, is ill and in pain, which has garnered attention by a doctor who has prescribed medication.

MRS. JASPER: “Lor', Lindy, how my side do hurt! But thank goodnis, dis job's done! (*she sinks exhausted into the rocker*) Run git me one them tablits de doctor lef fo' dis pain! Dis ole pain goin' to be takin' me 'way f'om heah one o' dese days!

LINDY: (*Looking at her in concern.*) See, Ma, I tole yuh not to be doin' all this wuk! Whut's Miss 'Liz'beth goin' er say when she comes heah this evenin' an' fine out you done all this wuk after she tole yuh pertic'lar yestiddy that she wuz'n goin'

let yuh out'n bed 'fo' three weeks an' here 't'ain't been a week sence baby wuz bawn!" (1).

Mrs. Jasper, despite the directions of self-care given her, goes on to proclaim the advice given her was from someone, "Mis' Liz'beth", who, "ain't got no seben children to clothe an' feed" (1). In the first breaths of the plays Mrs. Jasper is acknowledging a form of knowledge creation and life instruction that sits in opposition to her lived experience, which comprises her personal reality. Mrs. Jasper is acknowledging that she might have better insight as to what is necessary for her and in her life situation. Mis' Liz'beth, who enters later in the play, has an ethnicity that is uncertain to the reader, however her dialect is distinctly different from the Jasper family placing her somewhat outside the rural southern life of the Jaspers. Ms. Liz'beth and Mrs. Jasper speak with a familiarity that leads me to deduce they are both black women but from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Also revealed is that Lindy is leaving in the morning to begin college at Tuskegee, a historically black university. Lindy wonders aloud whether she should leave her mother,

LINDY: "an' leavin' yuh wid all dis washin' to do ever' week, an' de chillern to look after an' the baby an' all. Daddy he gits home so late he cain't be no help."  
(1).

Mrs. Jasper assures Lindy that she will "gittin' awright bimeby" (2) and that going to Tuskegee is an opportunity for Lindy to, "git mo'e out'n life dan Ah gits" (2). At Mrs. Jasper's insistence, Lindy brightens a little and speaks of her plans to return after three years of school and become the county teacher so that she, "kin do lots mo'e fo' you an' the chillern!" (2). The important lesson of an education and also returning to teach those in her community is interrupted by the cry of a newborn baby in an adjoining room. This is the first example in this play of the dream of

a better life-- earning a degree to return as an educator for the betterment of the community-- being interrupted by reality, the immediate needs of a newborn baby.

Mrs. Jasper questions aloud the whereabouts of Miles a younger sibling of sixteen who is also a dreaming musician constantly carrying his guitar and strumming,

MRS. JASPER: "some'airs settin' by de road thumpin' dem strings dat boy 'ud play ef me or you wuz dyin'!" (2).

Though Miles' dreams are not placed in a positive light, Mother comments on him as shiftles', Lindy acknowledges his dreams inside of her own and seeks to support him, "

LINDY: "Doan yuh go werrin' 'bout Miles, Ma. He'll be awright ef he kin only learn music, an' do whut he likes" (2).

Mrs. Jasper, calmed by Lindy's confidence goes to the bedroom to tend to the baby. The cries of the baby draw Lindy who bids Mrs. Jasper to sit and rest,

LINDY: "No, Ma, you set still I'll git his bottle an' 'tend to him. (*She goes into the bedroom*)" (2).

Shrieks of the children outside at play flood into the room bringing Mary Ellen, one of the children, with a complaint against her brother Aloysious,

MARY ELLEN: "Mek Aloysius b'have hisse'f! He hit me on de haid wid all his might! (3).

Mrs. Jasper hollers out to calm the ruckus of the playing children and to warn the children about playing too close to the clothes line with the drying laundry she and Lindy just finished.

MRS. JASPER: "John Henry, git down f'om dat tree, 'fo yuh have dem clo'es in de durt! Yo' chillern 'nuf to werry me to death!" (3).

Miles, just returned from the town store is without the milk and bread because,

MILES: “Mister Jackson say yuh cain't have no milk, an' no nothin' 'tel de bill's paid” (3).

Mrs. Jasper is exasperated as she states that there will be no money until she can return the day's laundry and her husband has already given the entirety of his check to the grocer. The Jasper family's plight represents the plight of the rural working poor.

Lindy returns after having gotten the baby to go back to sleep, saying she hopes Miss Elizabeth, the visiting nurse will bring milk for the baby but,

LINDY: “they ain't nothing heah fo' de other chillern” (3).

At this point-- at the alert of Aloysius, one of the young sons of Mrs. Jasper-- the children have disrupted the clothesline causing the clothes to fall in the dirt. Mrs. Jasper calls them inside and punishes them with no supper.

“MRS. JASPER: An' whut's mo'e, yuh ain't goin' git no suppah 'tel yuh larns to b'have yo'se'f!”

However, the real reason for their punishment of being sent to bed without supper is not lost on Aloysius,

ALOYSIUS: “Cain't fool me Ah heerd Linda say dey ain't no suppah fo' us!” (3).

The children file away into the bedroom leaving Miles who has rescued the laundry from the dirt while delivering news to Lindy.

MILES: “I fo'git to tell yuh I stopp't by Sam Jones an' he say he'll be 'round 'fo Lindy's trunk 'bout sundown” (4).

With the urging of Mrs. Jasper, Lindy drags the trunk from the corner of the room and opens it to begin packing for her journey to Tuskegee tomorrow.

Next Miss Elizabeth Shaw, arrives at the Jasper home to check on Mrs. Jasper who is now seated in the rocking chair while Lindy packs her trunk.

MISS SHAW: (*Looking in consternation at Mrs. Jasper.*) Malinda Jasper! What are you doing out of bed! You don't mean to say that you have washed all those clothes that I see in the yard?

MRS. JASPER: Yassum, me an' Lindy done 'em.

MISS SHAW: (*Provoked.*) And you look completely exhausted! Come you must get right to bed!

MRS. JASPER: (*Leaning her head wearily against the back of the rocker.*)

Lemme res' myse'f jes a minute Ah'll be goin' 'long torectly.

MISS SHAW: It's a wonder in your condition that you didn't die standing right at those tubs! I don't mean to scare you but – (3).

There is a switch from Southern dialect to proper English, and, although one might expect it, the response of Mrs. Jasper to Miss Shaw is not one of deferment. There is a familiarity in their speech as evidenced in what Mrs. Jasper goes on to share with Miss Shaw. Mrs. Jasper rebuts Miss Shaw's concerns by placing her duties as a mother to care for all these children as a bigger concern than dying. Mrs. Jasper uses the biblical reference of Elijah to make her case for hard work.

MRS. JASPER: “We ain't no Elijahs, Mis' 'Lis'beth, dey ain't no ravens flyin' 'roun' heah drappin' us food. All we gits, we has to git by wukin' hard!” (4).

In the same breath Mrs. Jasper thanks “Gawd” that Lindy is going to Tuskegee, “But thanks to be Gawd a light's dawnin'!” (4) that light is Lindy leaving to better herself, which will



retroactively better her family and her community. Lindy's desire to leave, attend college and return educated to teach and uplift others is a Black Feminist ideal in the 1919 play.

Lindy has been afforded a scholarship by

MRS. JASPER: "Some dem rich folks up yonder in yo' part de world is sen'in' huh".

"Up yonder" indicates the north, which also indicates where Miss Shaw is from. Mrs. Jasper prior to this statement has told Miss Shaw about the deep impression Booker T. Washington left on Lindy as a young girl after they went to see him speak.

MRS. JASPER: "Ah kin see him now him an' Lindy, jes a teeny slip o' gal after de speakin' wuz ovah down dere at Shady Grove, astandin' under de magnolias wid de sun apou'in' through de trees on 'em an' he wid his hand on my li'l Lindy's haid lak he wuz givin' huh a blessin', an' asayin': "When yuh gits big, li'l gal, yuh mus' come to Tuskegee an' larn, so's yuh kin come back heah an' he'p dese po' folks!" He's daid an' in his grave but Lindy ain't nevah fo'git dem words" (5).

Lindy returns to the room with more items for her trunk and Miss Shaw congratulates Lindy on her coming success at Tuskegee and inquires,

MISS SHAW: "what will the baby do without you! How is he this afternoon?" (5).

Lindy begins to answer and tells Miss Shaw that the baby is doing alright and that she has,

LINDY: "been rubbing his leg lack you showed me" (5)

since the child was born with one leg malformed. Miss Shaw has also brought milk for the baby and instructs Lindy to prepare the milk as previously directed and to give the rest to the other children. Miss Shaw then again attempts to coax Mrs. Jasper into bed so that she can rest. Mrs.

Jasper objects by explaining to Miss Shaw that she has always delivered a child and gone immediately back to work because,

MRS. JASPER: “wuk had to be done” (5).

However Miss Shaw replies by noting the difference in health between Mrs. Jasper’s younger body and her body now. Mrs. Jasper tries to plead her case to Miss Shaw urging her to understand that she must work to pay the funeral bills of past children and to feed those still surviving. Mrs. Jasper goes on to tell a story of another of her children who was mentally disabled but went to work for a white man who impregnated the child. As Mrs. Jasper tells the story,

MRS. JASPER: “one mawnin' we woked up and Pinkie an' huh baby wuz gawn! We ain't nevah heerd f'om huh tuh dis day (*she closes her eyes as if to shut out the memory of Pinkie's sorrow.*) Me an' Jim 'as allus put ouah tru's in de Lawd, an' we wants tuh raise up dese chillern to be good, honess' men en' women but we has tuh wuk so hard to give 'em de li'l dey gits dat we ain't got no time tuh look at'er dey sperrits. When Jim go out to wuk -- chillern's sleepin'; when he comes in late at night -- chillern's sleepin'. When Ah git through scrubbin' at dem tubs all Ah kin do is set in dis cheer an' nod -- Ah doan wants tuh see no chillern! Ef it warn't fo' Lindy huh got a mighty nice way wid 'em -- Gawd he'p 'em!” (6).

Mrs. Jasper is exasperated by her lot in life and wonders why “Gawd” would seek to punish her and her husband. However Miss Shaw turns the argument and says,

MISS SHAW: “God is not punishing you, Malinda, you are punishing yourselves by having children every year” (6).

It is here that we come to another major theme of the play, planned parenthood/birth control/knowledge of birth control. Miss Shaw advises Mrs. Jasper to stop having children,

MISS SHAW: "You must be careful!" (6).

But Mrs. Jasper doesn't know what that means,

MRS. JASPER: "Be keerful! Dat's all you nu'ses say! You an' de one whut come when Tom wuz bawn, an' Selena! Ah been keerful all Ah knows how but whut's it got me ten chillern, eight livin' an' two daid! You got'a be tellin' me sumpin' better'n dat, Mis' 'Liz'beth!" (6).

However Miss Shaw hints that she is not at liberty to tell Mrs. Jasper exactly how to be careful,

MISS SHAW: "...Malinda, when I took my oath as nurse, I swore to abide by the laws of the State, and the law forbids my telling you what you have a right to know!" (6).

Mrs. Jasper does not blame Miss Shaw, and Miss Shaw begins to help Mrs. Jasper to her bedroom to lie down. It should be noted that Miss Shaw through withholding valuable information shows a greater allegiance to the law than to camaraderie amongst women. This holding so strongly to the law even though she is in a rural area points to Miss Shaw's separation via class or color. Mrs. Jasper, as she is leaving, instructs Lindy to give the rest of the milk to the other children, to continue packing her trunk and ends thanking

MRS. JASPER: "Gawd yo' chance done come!" (7).

With Miss Shaw and Mrs. Jasper's exit, Mary Ellen -- one of the children -- pokes her head into the living room from the children's bedroom to inquire about the milk. The rest of the children follow drinking and sharing the remainder of the milk among them. Lindy gathers the children about her and begins to converse with them about her plans upon returning from college.

LINDY: “When I comes back I’m goan to bring yuh all some pretty readin’ books, an’ some clo’es so I kin tek yuh to school ever’ day where yuh kin learn to read ‘em!” (7).

Questions from the children ensue and Lindy allows herself and them to dream about their future of learning together and Miles’ future of being a musician.

LINDY: Yes indeedy! An’ whut’s mo’e I’m goan ‘a git Miles a fine new guitar an’ let him learn music. An’ some day ever’ body’ll be playin’ an’ singin’ his songs!

ALOYSIUS: (Glowing with excitement) Some day he might have his own band! Might’n’ he, Lindy? Lak dat big white one whut come fru heah f’om ‘Lanta! Ole Miles’ll come struttin’ down de road.

Lindy continues on to tell the children a story of attending church in,

LINDY: “fine Sunday clo’es, an a hoss an’ wagon,” (8)

which they will take to Shady Grove and sit beneath a tree and learn the Biblical stories of Joseph and his coat of many colors and Samuel,

LINDY: “whut de Lawd called while he wuz sleepin’” (8)

and the baby Jesus. Lindy is interrupted by Miss Shaw who calls for her from the bedroom. The children disappear back into their shared bedroom while Miss Shaw informs Lindy of Mrs. Jaspers condition, which has taken a turn for the worst. Miss Shaw instructs Miles to run to town and use the telephone to call for the doctor to come immediately. Miles exits with haste, and Lindy follows Miss Shaw back into the room with boiling water. *“In a few minutes the sobbing of Lindy can be heard, and the nurse re-enters the kitchen. She leans against the frame of the rear door as through exhausted and stares out into the yard at the clothes fluttering like white*

*spirits in the gathering dusk. Then sighing deeply, she puts on her bonnet and cape and turns to go.)*” (8). Miles has returned to deliver news of being unsuccessful at Hopes’ but before he can deliver the news Miss Shaw informs him that it’s too late, his mother, Mrs. Jasper has died.

MILES: “*(His guitar crashing to the floor.)* Dead!” (9).

Mrs. Jasper’s previous prediction “dat boy 'ud play ef me or you wuz dyin'!” (2) is wrong. Jasper is visibly broken at the news of his mother’s death. Miss Shaw without allowing Miles to go directly to his mother’s bedside, instructs,

MISS SHAW: “you must help Lindy all you can” and to “bring in the clothes before it get dark” (9).

Miss Shaw exits to attend to another patient leaving Miles and Lindy, who comes into the kitchen from Mrs. Jasper’s bedroom. “*The light has gone from her face for she knows that the path now stretching before her and the other children will be darker even than the way that they have already known.*” (9). Two dreams are broken by the weight of reality here, Lindy’s dream of college and becoming a teacher and Miles’ of becoming a musician is literally and figuratively broken. Lindy ends the play seated on her trunk in a daze but instructing Miles,

LINDY: “I reckon yu’d bettah walk up de road a piece to meet Dad an’ hurry him erlong. An’ stop in de Redmon’s an tell ‘em dey cain’t have de wash tomorrer ‘cause – (Gulping back her tears,) ‘cause Ma’s dead; but I’ll git ‘em out myself jes ez soon ez I kin. An’ Miles, leave word fo’ Sam Jones ‘at he need’n’ come fo’ de trunk” (9).

### **Black Feminist Core Theme Analysis: Black Women’s Labor**

*The Birth Control Review* a print publication from 1918 to 1940 was published and edited by Margaret Sanger, a social reformer and activist for birth control until 1928. The play was followed by the article, “Is Birth Control Immoral?” (“The Birth Control Review Archives”), which uses quotes from published, white men railing against black women’s equality as if to equate those mindsets to those who would be against access to birth control and information about birth control or is that my contemporary hope of the juxtaposition? *They That Sit in Darkness* seems to me to act as a platform for critical discussion for the remaining articles of the publication. However, understanding Sanger’s views on race complicate my understanding while adding a deeper layer of subversion and significance to Burrill’s play entry. A search through the New York University’s “The Margaret Sanger Papers Project” reveals ideas on eugenics as a science striving for “racial betterment” (“The Public Papers of Margaret Sanger: Web Edition”), which Sanger believed in but sought to add her birth control efforts as a necessary support to the success of eugenics. I would be remiss if I did not note that Adolf Hitler, Nazi ruler, used eugenics during World War II in attempts to exterminate the Jewish population and create a pure white race. From an article in the February, 1919 edition of *Birth Control Review*, written by Sanger,

“Eugenists emphasize the mating of healthy couple for the conscious purpose of producing healthy children, the sterilization of the unfit to prevent their populating the world with their kind... We who advocate Birth Control, on the other hand, lay all our emphasis upon stopping not only the reproduction of the unfit but upon stopping all reproduction when there is not economic means of providing care for those who are born in health.” (“The Public Papers of Margaret Sanger: Web Edition”).

Is Sanger being subversive and using this popular science of eugenics to push her own agenda of birth control for women and who are “unfit” in Sanger’s definition? Is Burrill “fit” because she is an educated, light-skinned black woman lesbian with no children? Reading Burrill’s play through Sanger’s lens Mrs. Jasper -- who has given birth to at least three children with mental and or physical maladies -- is “unfit” and should therefore have access to birth control to stop creating “unfit” children. As Sanger states later in the article, this access to birth control would lay the foundations for access of eugenicists to Mrs. Jasper, which I take to mean sterilization. However, I believe Burrill is more subversive with her character design of Mrs. Jasper. Burrill creates Mrs. Jasper as a knowledgeable woman who would welcome information on birth control. Mrs. Jasper is acutely aware of her family’s finances and being stretched beyond them. She acknowledges the need for education and seeks to send her daughter off to attain it. Mrs. Jasper is one birth control pamphlet away from being the type of woman that Sanger describes later in the same article as, “. . .a woman possessing an adequate knowledge of her reproductive functions is the best judge of the time and conditions under which her child should be brought into the world. . .it is her right. . .to determine whether she shall bear children or not, and how many children she shall bear if she chooses to become a mother” (“The Birth Control Review Archives”). Even with the death of Mrs. Jasper, that knowledge of finances for raising children, of necessity to work has already been passed on to Lindy through her being her mother’s assistant. Lindy replaces Mrs. Jasper in the care of the family and also possibly sits as an even stronger candidate for black women’s equality and access to birth control education because she has lived experience of child rearing without having given birth.

In its eight-page entirety, *They That Sit in Darkness* is a strong example of black theatre’s (in particular black female playwright’s) mastery of the one act play. Other examples are Alice

Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918) which I explore as a part of this study; Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* (1929) and *Exit: An Illusion* (1929) both published in *the Crisis* magazine; and Shirley Graham's *It's Morning* (1940). Characters are fully developed and alive, playing out situations from many different angles, yet allowing space for the audience or the reader to debate the decisions made by the characters. There is a clear exposition, rising and falling action, which are the tenets of American Theater gleaned from the Greek tradition and known as Freytag's triangle (Herman 155). This play accomplishes much in a short one-act of nine pages. *They That Sit in Darkness* aligns with Black feminist writing aesthetic in that the action takes place in one interior location, it focuses on community uplift and places black women at the center as they evaluate their lives (Sunni-Ali).

There is no record of a professional production of *They That Sit in Darkness*, but there are accounts that it was performed in the school where Mary Powell Burrill taught, M Street School later named Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. "Burrill staged *They {That} Sit in Darkness*, in New York with the assistance of several small theater groups... Du Bois also entered the play in the David Belasco Little Theater Tournament of 1928" (Allen 87). The play might have enjoyed many community productions, within schools, church meeting rooms and other private spaces. The content of the play-- birth control and inequities of blacks living in rural life-- leads me to believe that this material, which could have been seen as threatening in its potential empowerment of the Black rural class, would be performed in private spaces deemed safe to black Americans. While Du Bois did submit the play into a tournament, as mentioned above, the content did not necessarily align with his ideas of a propagandistic theater – creating plays about the “best” black people – the talented tenth -- to educate white people about the



humanity of black people. Instead this play seems aligned to educate black women about their placement in the growing movement around reproductive rights.

As a black woman director of theater, the theme of reproductive rights for black women within a strong well-written play is tantamount to discovering a lost treasure. It is a currency that speaks directly to me as a black woman, and it arrives in a play form, which is an area of my expertise. It uncovers a unique standpoint that speaks for black rural women of the time period but also transcends to black women of today. Conversations about reproductive rights are scarce and when they do happen, all too often they are among groups of men deciding what is best for women and women's bodies. For example, the 2012 Congressional Birth Control Hearings involved a panel comprised of mostly men ("Republican Hearing on Contraception"). That this conversation could happen without women at the center leading the discussion is a silencing of women, women's views, women's opinions, women's knowledge and women's voices. To distance the conversation from black women even further, one panel was comprised of four Caucasian men and one black man. This misrepresentation gives a strong reason for the evolution of Feminist Standpoint theory—"(1) Knowledge is socially situated. (2) Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions that it is for the non-marginalized. (3) Research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized" (Bowell). Feminist Standpoint theory is at the root of the development of Black Women's Thought.

Patricia Hill Collins divides the core theme of Black Feminist Thought into two parts: 1) Black women's paid work is organized within intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender and 2) Black women's unpaid family labor is simultaneously confining and empowering for black women (Collins). There are two black females at the center of Burrill's play. Mrs. Jasper,

the mother of seven children, and Lindy, the eldest daughter of Mrs. Jasper. Each of these characters counters popular white construction of blackness – the Mammy stereotype and the Jezebel stereotype-- while exhibiting core black feminist values. Exhibition of core Black Feminist values by these two characters is the focus of this analysis. These two lead characters -- both black women -- exemplify these two themes in character representation. Mrs. Jasper represents the first theme of Black feminist analysis of Black women's paid work being organized with intersections of race, class and gender. The character of Lindy, the second theme of "...unpaid family labor is simultaneously confining and empowering" (Collins 52).

### *Paid Labor*

Mrs. Jasper is a wife and mother to seven children. She lives a rural life as a washerwoman. Her paid labor is to collect the soiled clothes and linen of her customers, bring them to her home, hand launder, dry, fold and return them to the client as soon as possible. She gets paid when the laundry is returned clean and dry to the client. At the beginning of the play we see Mrs. Jasper washing laundry out of a bin, and we come to understand she has given birth less than a week ago to the seventh child of the family. In addition to being a washerwoman, Mrs. Jasper is also a dutiful wife, evident by her caring for the children and doing her part to supplement their family income.

Mrs. Jasper's work lies at the intersection of three oppressions; race, class and gender. Each of these oppressions is represented in this play, as she is black in a white supremacist culture, lower class, and female in a largely patriarchal society. Mrs. Jasper also has a distinct reaction to these three oppressions and addresses each in her responses through the play. Her character speaks to how informed this particular black woman was to her circumstance.

For the character Mrs. Jasper, the issues of oppression in race, gender and class intersect around her reproductive organs. Mrs. Jasper has seven living children; Lindy, Miles, Aloysius, Mary Ellen, Jimmie, John Henry, and an unnamed infant; two who died as babies, Tom and Selena; and Pinky who disappeared after bearing the baby of a white landowner for whom the girl was a housekeeper. Mrs. Jasper is forced by her situation to work the heavy labor job of washerwoman to make enough money to barely feed the children, to purchase medicine when they are ill. However food and medicine are secondary purchases as Mr. and Mrs. Jasper are still paying funeral expenses for the deceased children. Mr. Jasper, husband and head of the household is mentioned as constantly working but does not appear in the play. They are a marriage of workers, and Mrs. Jasper is a washerwoman, a wife, and, if there is any energy left, a mother. In this last position of mother, Mrs. Jasper relies heavily on Lindy because she and her husband are worked to the point of exhaustion and are unable to,

MRS. JASPER “look at’er dey sperrits” (71).

Mrs. Jasper speaks of giving birth one day and getting up and back to work the next because it is necessary for her to work. Mrs. Jasper and Miss Shaw, the nurse, in dialogue discuss Mrs. Jasper’s weakened heart from working and giving birth to so many children. Miss Shaw pleads for Mrs. Jasper to be careful but what does being careful mean? Mrs. Jasper is fulfilling her duties as a wife and lying with her husband but

MRS. JASPER: “de chillern come!” (71).

This is where gender intersects. Mrs. Jasper is fulfilling her wifely duties. Her gender does not permit her to deny her husbands carnal wishes. Whether she also enjoys sex is not the issue but that there is sex and there is desire from her husband. Mrs. Jasper doesn’t understand when Miss Shaw says, “You must be careful!” (71). When Mrs. Jasper inquires further Miss Shaw is halted

because it is “unlawful” to explain birth control to Mrs. Jasper. Here is the second intersection, of race. She is doubly oppressed because at the time of the play, 1919, birth control was illegal for women however, there was the eugenics movement among white women and educated black women to discuss it. The eugenics movement came into full swing by 1924 but its founding stages were the basis for “...the passage of a number of laws having to do with immigration, mandatory sterilization, and anti-miscegenation, all designed to protect white Americans from a perceived threat: mongrelization at the hand of throngs of millions of immigrants” (Winfield). This play written in 1919, was published as a theatrical teaser into a conversation about black women’s reproductive rights, which makes the play even more subversive. Burrill with subtlety addresses the intersections of race and class and gender while forming a black feminist argument for access to education on reproduction. Mrs. Jasper’s oppressions feed each other creating a cycle of imprisonment. Mrs. Jasper does not have simple reproductive education because she is uneducated. She is uneducated because she can’t afford to go to take time away from working to attend school. She can’t afford to take time off from work because she must work to feed and provide for her family. The cycle of oppressions of race and class and gender conspire to keep Mrs. Jasper in a state of poverty.

Mary Powell Burrill, an Emerson College alum, poet, writer, teacher and activist, used her pen to bring these disparities to light especially to a section of the black community and to allies of the black community and black women through the play’s magazine publication. Burrill is theatrically gesticulating towards the existence of a system of inequality. Evelyn Nakano Glenn offers an analysis of two models “...for analyzing the “double” (race, gender) and “triple” (race, gender, class) oppression of racial ethnic women are widely acknowledged, no satisfactory theory has been developed to analyze what happens when these systems of oppression intersect”

(Glenn 87). Mrs. Jasper acknowledges the existence of intersecting oppressions, comments on the cycle and then asks for more information than Miss Shaw is legally allowed to offer. Written in 1919, Burrill seems to be hinting at the larger system of oppressions and the ensuing movements of the early 1900's, the Women's Movements, including suffrage and labor equality.

*Unpaid Family Labor*

“Black women’s unpaid family labor is simultaneously confining and empowering for Black women” (Collins 52). Lindy is imbued – through practice-- with the knowledge of what it takes to tend to children financially and emotionally without having given birth. She assists Mrs. Jasper in providing food and shelter as a second mother to her siblings. She also understands the financial needs of the family by working – washing laundry – with Mrs. Jasper, her mother. This knowledge of how to care for her family is the same knowledge that will confine her to the same domestic labor once her mother has died from exhaustion.

Lindy’s unpaid family labor includes taking care of the newborn baby by feeding and massaging its malady-ridden legs, helping Mrs. Jasper with the laundry, supporting her brother Miles’ musicianship; caring for all the children physically and emotionally by telling stories to and with them; and also intends her future to be as a teacher for all the little ones in the black community after she returns from college.

Lindy, because her parents work so hard, has the privilege to dream of being a teacher and practice this type of nurturing on her siblings. She facilitates and supports the dreams of all the children and is lauded by Mrs. Jasper as the one who nourishes the children spiritually. Miss Shaw, the nurse, praises Lindy for taking care of her mother, Mrs. Jasper, and the children. Miss Shaw gives instructions for massaging the newborn’s crooked leg and for proper bottle milk feedings. Lindy also tends to the imaginations and emotional growth of the children as she keeps

them entertained with stories of bringing them books and clothes so they can attend school everyday where she will be the teacher of all the colored kids. For Miles, Lindy dreams of bringing him a new guitar on which he can really create his own music. Lindy is the dreamer and the dream maker and dream sustainer for the family. In this way her “unpaid family labor”, spending time tending to the spiritual wellness of the children, is empowering to her future as an educator. Lindy, with the space to remain a child – not needing to leave the home to work to earn money – is given the space to dream of something better for her family and to help them dream too. This is emotional care.

The unpaid labor becomes confining when Mrs. Jasper dies. What was once freeing was also dependent on Mrs. Jasper’s survival. With Mrs. Jasper’s death, Lindy’s unpaid labor now demands that she stop dreaming and forgo higher education. She is physically, emotionally and financially confined to the family immediately. The financial family care and the washerwoman jobs shift to Lindy. She is no longer free to dream because she must fill the orders/do the work that her mother did in order to pay the bills to feed the children and pay off the funeral debt. The generational transference of the cycle of oppression is complete.

Mary Powell Burrill has written a play with central characters that fostered a Black Feminist image formation in the early 1900’s. Mrs. Jasper questioned the roles of gender and the positions of race and class. These questions echoed the women’s movements of suffrage and labor from the turn of the century. These movements were fighting for equal rights, the right to vote and fair wages and working conditions for women. Perhaps Burrill subtly includes black rural women as potential recruits to the movement, specifically the black women’s club movement since black women and the triple oppression they experienced were not welcomed into the movements of white women (Higginbotham 49). The characters of Mrs. Jasper and

Lindy offer an opportunity to practice questioning the world in which black women lived and the laws that governed their bodies without their input. Lindy, stepping into her mother's role as provider is also in an interesting position because she has garnered information about the triple oppression without experiencing childbirth or having directly worked as a domestic.

Reproductive rights are intuitively tied to this theory of work because Mrs. Jasper is working to pay for the funeral expenses of two children who have died, for the living children's food and medical care, and, in the midst of the work, the children keep coming. This idea that work is tied to child rearing and child rearing is tied to work for rural black women a is site of Black Feminist Thought and standpointist knowledge creation of rural black women's experience. While rooted in the experience of rural black women, the themes and views are relevant to black women and women of varying socioeconomic status'. "As women who suffered the combined disabilities of sex, class and race, they possessed a powerful argument for the right to vote. But racism ran so deep within the woman suffrage movement that the doors were never really opened to Black women" (Davis and Random House (Firm) 143).

### **Live Reading with Community of Black Women**

As a next step I conducted a live reading of *They That Sit in Darkness*. The reading was held in the home of a member of a group of black, educated, queer women in Baltimore, Maryland. I became affiliated with the group through my dissertation-writing partner who was a founding member. Several members of the group were also doctoral students pursuing areas of study in sexuality, gender studies and Black girlhood studies. My research and the different research areas of group members seemed to intersect in interesting ways. As queer black women

pursuing careers in academia, there was also a desire to support one another in this unique process. It was agreed that the reading would occur during one of their regular meetings.

The design of the gatherings conformed to the group's routine; an evening potluck with wine and other adult beverages. The meeting opened with drinks and chit-chat, preceded by sharing a meal together. After the meal, we sat in the living room with dessert and read the play aloud with discussion following. To start the reading I introduced myself by discussing my life as a black female director of theater and doctoral candidate. I gave a small amount of information upfront on the playwright and the script before we launched into the reading. The women had decided on which roles they wanted to read early in the evening.

The script, *They That Sit in Darkness*, eight pages in length, and is written in a rural southern dialect. The women stumbled over some words but the group consistently helped each other, enabling the voice of the characters to slowly rise to the surface. I saw each woman add vocal inflections to echo and enhance the written dialogue, creating a performed reading of the text. There were a few times the reading paused as the women gave audible sounds of agreement or disapproval to the happenings of the text. In the moment Miss Shaw says to Mrs. Jasper to stop "...having children you that sit in darkness must be careful..." the women almost broke into conversation and analysis but, the reading continued, and they finished reading the play.

At the close, there was a collective exhale, a sigh, perhaps in awe and recognition of the play and all the content the playwright had crafted therein. One member said, "she did all that in nine pages?" The group collectively echoed her sentiment. "What were your thoughts?" I asked, and said no more because the group launched into a deep analysis of the many topics and themes of the play. Below is a sampling of the comments:

- Who can tell who about having children?



- What were the conversations about birth control?
- Eugenics – stepping into that pile “she said more than most would have said”
- Funeral expenses, having to pay for the funeral expenses of the children who died but not being allowed to know about practicing birth control methods. Paying for funeral expenses kept the family in poverty and unable to feed the living children.
- The beginnings of Planned Parenthood
- Ethnicity of Miss Shaw, the nurse; a light-skinned, tragic mulatto figure unable to give the proper instruction because her position forbade it.
- The play laid out such a complicated subject
- Here in 2013, people don’t understand when they ovulate (to use as a form of birth control) and this was written in 1919.
- Who is Mary Powell Burrill and who is she to tell this story? Musings on her social class and if she was light-skinned and/or passing?

The majority of comments were around childbearing, education on women’s reproductive cycles, and the sacrifice of education forced upon Lindy, the daughter. The group anchored their conversation in the power of discussing reproductive rights, a woman’s reproductive cycle, and withholding of educational information as a tool for oppression.

Audre Lorde in her essay, “Age, Race, Class, Sex” references a gap of knowledge between generations. This gap is caused because the youth and elders cease to come together and share their experiences and thus are destined to remain on a loop of repetition and lessons in society repeated and relearned over and over and over again. This reading aids in the repair of that generation gap by bringing Burrill and through Burrill’s words, experiences in/from the early twentieth century into the present for these contemporary queer, black women to engage

with, learn from and build on thus creating new knowledge creation. In addition to cross-generational knowledge creation, the live readings are a site of intergenerational knowledge creation across academic disciplines, career fields and political viewpoints. The gathering for the play reading is significant because it produces a shared pool of knowledge. The space of the live readings with community allows black women to discuss links around being a black woman in America.

In this reading, the group of queer black women had specific knowledge about and what young women experience around reproductive education. One woman, a sexologist currently working at Johns Hopkins University studying adolescent females and young women in relation to pelvic inflammatory disease noted how even as we are supposed to be an evolved society, young women today are largely uneducated about their own reproductive organs and function. How many know the different methods of contraception beyond birth control pills or using condoms?

Reading a nine-page play, written in 1919, wrought two hours of intense discussion, which was stopped only because it was nearing one o'clock in the morning. As a black director of theater, I interpret from this experience that the themes Burrill addresses are still relevant and in need of discussion. It signals to me that Burrill's play should be revisited and used as a stepping stone into conversations on women's reproductive rights, in particular Black women's reproductive rights and sexual education around women's bodies.

While reproductive rights are a central theme of the play I also see women's work as an equally prevalent, yet understated theme of the play. Looking closely at the mother and daughter characters there is a delineation of Black women's work and a seamless interplay of how unpaid

family labor, caring for one's own family; becomes paid labor at the sacrifice of the former. This interplay informs the next section of analysis.

### **Autoethnographic Reflections**

I met with a group of eight queer women of color to read Burrill's *They That Sit in Darkness*. I brought a crockpot of chili as offering to the group; their meetings were always a potluck. The evening of the reading there was a drizzling rain and the clouds hung low over the Baltimore city buildings. The main entrance to our location was a firehouse red, unmarked door inset along a white wall three-quarters down an alleyway off of a main street of the downtown. The red door thrust open, and I was greeted by the host of the evening. She embraced my friend and then, after a brief introduction, she embraced me with a full body hug. It was the kind of hug between friends where personal space makes no sense at all. I was truly embraced. In her hand was a stemmed wine glass of what I assumed was red wine with less than half in the bulb. The heavy red door slammed shut behind us as we were ushered inside and out of the damp of the night. The entryway was dark but I could make out the walls were cinderblock covered unevenly over, perhaps several times by a grout or cement then followed by layers of white paint. We stepped across a 5-inch gap in the floor onto a freight elevator where the host pulled a hanging chain with a hoop at the end from the ceiling closing the deeper red steel door of the freight elevator. She then moved to the left side of the elevator where there was a square hole in the wall and pulled a cable which was invisible to me until I saw her grasp it and pull. The elevator lurched upward. The elevator lighting was dim. There was a cart, also on the left, with an artists painting sitting on top of it, which lent some internal, seemingly spiritual light and welcome.

The elevator came to a stop our host reversed her actions and opened the steel door. Throughout the journey upward my friend and the host chatted, catching up on topics that I tried not to listen to because it felt intrusive. We exited the elevator into a hallway lit only by the streetlight ebbing through a window and turned left around the corner that opened into a long and wide and tall hallway. Slashing the darkness of the hallway was light that eeked through a cracked door. Through the door was the location of the reading and home of the host.

The location was a beautiful loft apartment with steel beams and exposed heating and cooling ducts above and floor to ceiling windows. Inside several members were already gathered. The spirit was warm and welcoming. I was met with more full body hugs, smiles and offers of wine or whiskey. In the far right corner, diagonal from the door, was the kitchen area and a woman with her back to us initially seemed to be preparing some food. I set my crockpot of chili on the kitchen counter, plugged it in and set my mind on having a whiskey at the behest of the host.

There were two women seated around a long wooden table which sat in front of a bookcase chock full of Black feminist reading, queer women of color authors and books on spirituality. To the right of this long bookcase spanning the wall was a nook of open space and on the floor was candles and an outline defining the space; an alter of some sort; it seemed sacred to this space. I sat at the long table and observed the women as each entered and greeted each other with open, full-bodied hugs. There was music playing, old school love songs which they all sang and reminisced to even though the time period of the music was a little before their time – I knew a bit of their age-bracket. But they embraced the music and I could see they all had older souls and an appreciation of music that told a story.

Once all the women had arrived or were close to arriving, the food was announced as ready to eat. Disposable flatware and plates were available, and we spooned up bowls of chili and chips and sat round the long table to eat and continue talking with one another. A script was requested by one of the members as soon as I arrived and that person then announced her choice of character to read. Soon thereafter I passed out more scripts, and others called out roles they wanted to read. After eating, we moved to the comfortable sitting area closer to the door, and any remaining roles were distributed. Those were roles of the children and Miss Shaw, the nurse. Before reading, I introduced myself and my project once again and explained a bit more in detail the three playwrights at the center of my study and this experiment with live readings, what I believe it meant to people reading the plays in the time period and what it might mean to them, reading it aloud in a similar setting of a home.

The events of the reading and post-reading discussion for the women – eugenics, reproductive rights and education for black women after slavery and a socioeconomic look at sexual reality for black women -- are detailed in the previous section. What I want to draw attention to is how the reading unexpectedly affected me. As a theater director, I have attended and led several play readings. A reading is an integral part of any play process for a new play or an established play. I did not expect anything different, but the evening was very different. I've narrowed the difference to be attributed to the following combining factors: the location and setting, the people and the play.

*The location and setting.* Having the reading in a home changed the mood for me. The reading became about sharing and discussing intense material in the safe and sacred place of home. Conversations flowed between two women, then three, then five, and back to two an indicator that insecurities were dropped. My newness to the group was eased with the help of

food and wine, and the comfortable and inviting spirit of this safe space. The audience and actors were the same, which changed the dynamic of performance from that which I was accustomed working on a play in the rehearsal hall. There was a fusion of audience and performer in the same vein as Augusto Boal's declaration of principles from the Theater of the Oppressed website, "To be Human is to be Theatre: the co-existence of actor and spectator in the same individual. This is Subjective Theatre" ("Theatre of the Oppressed").

In the past, safe spaces controlled by black people were the black churches which is why the Black Women's Club Movement was born in the Black Baptist church (Higginbotham 48). The black church was where you were called by your name, instead of "boy" or "gal" or other diminutive titles. However the contemporary Black church has ceased to become a safe space because of the opposition to the same-sex marriage equality movement ("The New Black | Independent Lens"). Therefore, in this particular case, women who love women have fashioned their own safe space outside of the church and in their homes. These queer women much like the queer women with whom I met, have formed their own group and established a community, a mood, and a format for meeting to facilitate a gathering where they can discuss issues relevant to themselves as whole people living fully in who they are.

*The people.* All the women in the group knew each other and were connected through race, similar educational pursuits and through queerness. I found the women, in this space, to be fully living in their bodies as black queer women. There was a confidence, and no evidence of competition among them. They were all beautiful in their right and open and welcoming. Perhaps this was also facilitated by the location. They were all comfortable with one another, which made me feel comfortable as well. They all had natural black hairstyles and dressed fashionable -- urban, bohemian, professional, and chic styles.

I felt safe and comfortable among this group of highly educated, queer black women. In this group I found conversation and opinions similar to my own, and yet the echo opened new doors into my own identification with and as queer. In this group, I found other women who were like me. We shared similar views on sexuality as something fluid and open to change over time as opposed to rigid roles of gender and sexuality. What I discovered in this forum was a safe space to discuss, debate and go deeper into conversations about queerness as personal, as political and in terms of sexual orientation. In the attempt to recreate the safe spaces in which these plays were originally shared, I stumbled into the recognition of self-need for a community similar to me, black, queer, woman in which to practice my own process of self-definition. I posit my own insight might have mirrored those of a queer black women's writing group of the time period. The safe space of a home may have offered the same opportunity to practice and converse about queerness, among other things, to Angelina Weld Grimké and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. That space is also a site of self-recognition and group acceptance for these women enabling them to continue to excavate their developing their voice.

*The play.* Usually a play that can reach a full professional production is a play that lasts between 60 and 90 minutes as a one-act without an intermission or a two-act play with a longer act-one than act-two. These are the plays that people attend at a theater and pay money to witness. The end goal of ticket sales was how I used to think about theater. It also determined the plays I considered worthy as a director. I would read a play and wonder, do I want to direct this and could it draw a crowd and sell tickets? Capitalism informed my theater making decisions. After reading this play, I wanted to direct it but with an alternative vision of theater production.

I first read the play sitting alone in my office. When I finished the play I looked around as if to say to anyone, did you see that?! The importance of the play content and the brilliance with

which it was written was confirmed for me during the live reading with the group of queer black women. We collectively needed to talk to each other about what just happened and did for nearly two hours.

At the end of the evening, several of the women asked if we could do a production of the play, and they all expressed interest in it. Whether it happens or not is not the issue, it is the desire to perform and the desire for that embodied practice of the play that spurred so much conversation in such a short period of time. Imagine a full week of rehearsal, 8 hours a day. The depths of conversation that would ensue led by that group of performers could guide conversation and audience dialogue about the issues presented in the play. I imagine a day of focused discussion could come from one performance of the play.

## **Conclusion**

This modern day experience illuminated this 1919 work in several ways. That this play can exist and thrive outside the producing and entertaining world of theater and is more prescient and socially relevant to challenges still felt by many black women today. Recreating the private and safe space for a reading, the play demands the participants be both performer/storyteller and witness/listener, a duality mirrored in being a part of community but also offering critique of it. It also is a safe space for intergenerational sharing of experiences around being, black, queer and woman in America. The reading offers an embodied practice of this vital tool in sustaining and advancing community. The play offers the content of discussion, women's paid and unpaid labor, education, reproductive rights for black women, as well as reproductive health of black women. This play can be effectively used to foster discussion, not solely for entertaining an audience.



In 1919, Burrill answered the question of what it means to be a black, rural woman in America through her central, black female characters, Mrs. Jasper and Lindy. As her mouthpiece, Mrs. Jasper voices the frustrations of the working poor, their struggle with finances and child bearing and the dreams and talents of their children. *They That Sit in Darkness* sits as a case study joining the struggles and hopes for betterment of the rural black women to the urban black women among whom Burrill socialized. I believe Burrill's play opened conversations that would fortify the foundations for not only a Black feminist theater aesthetic but for Black Feminist theory. The contribution of Burrill to queer black feminist aesthetic can be marked by the way in which she aligns the plight of rural black women with the plight of urban black women fighting for equal rights, the right to vote and fair wages and labor laws.

## Chapter 5

### *Self-Definition Through Finding One's Voice in Angelina Weld Grimke's "Rachel"*

Angelina Weld Grimké's play *Rachel* (1916), was entered into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), *The Crisis* magazine's first play submission contest in 1916. The NAACP Drama Committee selected *Rachel* as the winner and awarded it with three semi-professional productions. The first production had two performances in Washington, D.C. March 1916 at the Myrtilla Miner Normal School (Hull 119) where it was reviewed by Ralph Graves and determined to be better suited for publication than production. Graves thought the play "...would have a wide field of Missionary usefulness" (Hull 119–21). Other reviews thought *Rachel* was purporting 'race suicide' (Hull 121). The role of a young black woman was/is to get married, be a supportive wife to your husband and have children. Rachel's choice is to forego marriage and children, which was interpreted by heteronormative society as race genocide. In denying the societal design of her role as a young black woman she chooses a life in queer time; living outside, "temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity..." (Halberstam 6). Grimké drafted not only a character's choice of living a life in queer time but she, chronicles the characters journey which forces her to make that decision. The second production was produced by the NAACP at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City in April of 1917. The third and final production by the NAACP Drama Committee was in Cambridge, Massachusetts May 1917 at St. Bartholomew's Church.

*Rachel*, was presented as the theatrical response to D. W. Griffith's film, *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Griffith's film told a story of two families, one from the North and the other from the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction. The film is perhaps most known for its portrayal of black men, played by white men in blackface, as savages with an uncontrollable lust to rape white women. *Birth of a Nation* also proclaims the birth of the Klu Klux Klan as the necessary saving force against the savage Black man portrayed in the film. The characters of

*Rachel*, when analyzed individually, deconstruct popular white constructions of blackness (stereotypes). The young boy in this play, Jimmy is in direct contrast to the “pickaninny” construction. “The pickaninny was a dehumanized black child who was typically depicted semi – naked, outdoors, eating watermelon, and merrily excepting (or even welcoming) comic violence” (R. M. Bernstein 64). Jimmy, whom we meet at four years and seven years old, encounters both physical pain and emotional pain that cripples his spirit. Grimké, through Jimmy, not only articulates both types of pain beautifully, she is also able to attribute that pain to a specific, recognizable event occurring around education. By creating a discerning and feeling character in the body of a seven year old black male, Grimké dispels the myth of the unfeeling black child and constructs the black child as innocent, a characteristic that in theater of the time, i.e. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was attributed only to white children (R. Bernstein 193). The mother character in *Rachel*, Mrs. Loving, counters the mammy stereotype of a black woman who loved massa’s children and drenched them with kindness and love, while acting as a tyrant to her own children and an emasculating force to black men. Mrs. Loving, her name both a proper noun and a verb, is her name incarnate. She is a self-employed seamstress who delights in her children and showers them with love. Tom, Rachel’s brother, who comes to be called Uncle Tom by Jimmy, deconstructs the stereotype reinforced in the time period through the character by the same name in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* who is religious and because of that religion devoted to his master. John Strong, the love interest of Rachel and friend of the family, is educated and sophisticated. He is the financial provider for his mother and anticipates building a family of his own with Rachel. All characteristics that sit in opposition to the savage black man incapable of being a civil contributing member of American society, which gave cause and reason for mobs of white people to justify lynching innocent black men (Mitchell, *Living with Lynching* 8).

My analysis focuses on the title character, Rachel, and how she deconstructs the stereotype of the Jezebel. “This image of the “bad black girl” represented the undeniable sexual side of African-American women. The traditional Jezebel was a light-skinned, slender Mulatto girl with long straight hair and small features (Jewell 46). She more closely resembled the European ideal for beauty than any pre-existing images. The creation of the hyper-sexual seductress jezebel served to absolve white males of responsibility in the sexual abuse and rape of African-American women. Black women in such cases were said to be “askin’ for it” meaning asking to be sexually assaulted. Grimké vanquishes the Jezebel, white male construction of black women by creating Rachel, a young, vibrant black woman, deeply sensual, cognizant of her sensuality yet shows restraint and intelligence in how and to whom she expresses emotions tied to that sensuality. As I will discuss in this chapter, the selective power Rachel exhibits informs her development of self and a self-defined black woman’s collective voice. The term collective represents an amalgamation of the varying voices black women, not as an essentialist claim of one, unified, black woman’s voice.

### **Synopsis and Preliminary Analysis**

#### *Stage Directions – Observations of Time and Space*

Like *They That Sit in Darkness*, *Rachel* also begins with a queering of the home space of a black family living in the north. Two pages of detailed stage directions describe the interior of the apartment. Angelina Weld Grimké is specific as to the furniture, placement of properties like a roll of piano music, which windows are open or shut, the colors of walls, baseboards, drapery and carpets, as well as the artwork that adorns the walls. Grimké created, within the stage directions, a home space that is clean, ordered and intimates the inhabitants have an appreciation

for art and music. Had Du Bois' intended audience, white middle class people, ever been exposed to the interior home of a black family? By attending the play, *Rachel*, they were given an opportunity that perhaps challenged their ideas of black people as vastly different than themselves. These setting elements are integral parts of the narrative. Noting their evolution from act to act aid in communicating the story of this family over four years; a length of time I found apropos for Rachel to develop and exercise her voice of choice.

The stage directions also introduce the characters. Grimké queers these characters' as well by presenting an image that sits outside of popular performed constructions of blackness, in particular, black women. Mrs. Loving is revealed at the sewing machine. Then Rachel Loving, daughter of Mrs. Loving enters. Rachel's appearance immediately contrasts the constructions this era would have been accustomed to. "In her left arm she carries four or five books strapped together; under her right, a roll of music. Her hat is twisted over her left ear and her hair is falling in tendrils about her face. She brings into the room with her the spirit of abounding life, health, joy, youth"(3). The books she carries suggest she is schoolgirl, an avid reader, the music suggests she holds musical talents, and the tendrils of hair suggest that she cares for her appearance. All these are signs of queering because they immediately place Rachel outside of the dominant culture's ideas of black woman at the birth of the century. Given Grimké's description, Rachel could not be pigeonholed as a Jezebelle or a pickaninny. Stepping onstage and presenting this black female character is an act of resistance against the constructions of blackness presented at the time minstrelsy shows were prominent. The presence of her black body onstage was like nothing that had been presented before. She entered through a door with a key, which we hear turning. She enters without a joke or without any language at all. She IS. She stands singularly without the help/connection or obligation or to support another. She IS. "Mrs. loving pauses,

needle in hand, as soon as she hears the turning key and the banging door. There is a smile on her face. For a second, mother and daughter smile at each other. Then Rachel throws her books upon the dining room table, places the music they're also, but with care, and rushing to her mother, gives her a bear hug and a kiss." (3). Two black female bodies onstage, alone and in loving, familial, relation only to one another – radical subjectivity in 1916 American theater. Showing two black, female bodies onstage in this way was radical subjectivity and another example Grimké's playwriting as queer. "Nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (Halberstam 6). According to the dominant white culture in the early twentieth century black women were domestics or prostitutes with an insatiable appetite for sexual intercourse.

The detailed stage descriptions of the apartment suggest a modest home but with everything in its place. The framed artwork suggests the owner has an appreciation for finer things. The home has a sewing machine with fabrics around it ready for use. There "is a bookcase full of books" (1) suggesting an appreciation for literature. "a simply framed, inexpensive copy of Jean François Millet's "The Reapers"" (1) hangs on the wall suggesting an appreciation for art and culture and perhaps a remembrance of another time as the content of the painting is of agricultural/agrarian life. Hanging over the piano is the Sistene Madonna by Raphael, suggests a religiosity or some religious belief held in esteem within the household. Supporting a belief in things unseen and hanging on a third wall is Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones' "Golden Stairs", a portrayal of a host of angels alighting a golden staircase to heaven.

### Act One

We are introduced to the inhabitants and the top floor apartment dwelling of the Loving family: Mrs. Loving, Rachel Loving, Tom Loving. We also meet Jimmy, a young boy who lives

on the floor below and a friend of the family, Mr. Strong, who has come to pick up a waist -- a section of a Victorian bodice-- Mrs. Loving has sewn for his mother. We learn that Mrs. Loving works from home as a seamstress. Rachel is a high school girl with a love of children, books and singing and playing sheet music on the piano. Tom is in college, has just become quarterback of the squad, works a side job and gives all his wages to his mother. Mrs. Loving is emotionally worn assumingly from all the sewing work she has to do, but the real reason is because it is the ten-year anniversary of her husband and son's death. She has also chosen to reveal the events of their deaths to Rachel and Tom tonight. Throughout the first act we hear the lessons of black persons identity in a white persons designed world being learned by both Rachel and Tom through new experiences with their White school friends. By the end of act one we learn that Mr. Loving and their half-brother George were lynched, "by Christian people – in a Christian land...they were all church members in good standing – the best people" (Grimké 23).

MRS. LOVING: Just a moment, Rachel. (*Pauses, continuing slowly and very seriously*) Tom and Rachel! I have been trying to make up my mind for some time whether a certain thing is my duty or not. Today – I have decided it is. You are old enough, now, -- and I see you ought to be told" (Grimké 22).

These words published in 1916, are similar to words that my Black parents told my brother and I some years ago. The lesson that followed was about how to safely navigate being a black person in white American society. It is too familiar and should be the shame of our country that this is still applicable in the lives of Black Americans in nearly a century later. Mrs. Loving proceeds to tell the story at the request of Tom.

MRS. LOVING: ...When I married your father I was a widow. My little George was seven years old. From the very beginning he worshiped your father. He



followed him around – just like a little dog. All children were like that with him. I myself have never seen anybody like him. “Big” seems to fit him better than any other word. He was big-bodied – big-souled. His loves were big and his hates. You can imagine, then, how the wrongs of the Negro – ate into his soul. *(Pauses)*. He was utterly fearless. *(A silence)*. He edited and owned, for several years, a small negro paper. In it he said a great many daring things. I used to plead with him to be more careful. I was always afraid for him. For a long time, nothing happened – he was too important to the community. And then – one night – then years ago – a mob made up of the respectable people in the town lynched an innocent black man – and what was worse – they knew him to be innocent. A white man was guilty. I never saw your father so wrought up over anything: he couldn’t eat; he couldn’t sleep; he brooded night and day over it. And then – realizing fully the great risk he was running, although I begged him not to – and all his friends also – he deliberately and calmly went to work and published a most terrific denunciation of that mob. The old prophets in the Bible were not more terrible than he. A day or two later, he received an anonymous letter, very evidently from an educated man, calling upon him to retract his words in the next issue. If he refused his life was threatened. The next week’s issue contained an arraignment as frightful, if not more so, than the previous one. Each word was white-hot, searing. That night, some dozen masked men came to our house... We were not asleep – your father and I. They broke down the front door and made their way to our bedroom. Your father kissed me – and took up his revolver. It was always loaded. They broke down the door. *(A silence. She continues slowly*

*and quietly*). I tried to shut my eyes – I could not. For masked men fell – they did not move anymore – after a little. *(Pauses)*. Your father was finally overpowered and dragged out. In the hall – my little seventeen – year – old George try to rescue him. Your father begged him not to interfere. He paid no attention. It ended in there dragging them both out. *(Pauses)*. My little George– was – a man!

*(Controls herself with an effort)*. He never made an outcry. His last words to me were: “Ma, I am glad to go with father.” I could only nod him. *(Pauses)*. While they were dragging them down the steps, I crept into the room where you were. You were both asleep. Rachel, I remember, was smiling. I knelt down by you – and covered my ears with my hands – and waited. I could not pray – I couldn’t for long time – afterwards. *(A silence)*. It was very still when I finally uncovered my ears. The only sounds like a fake rustle of leaves and the “– tapping of the twig of a tree” against the window. I hear it still – sometimes in my dreams. *It was the tree – where they were. (A silence)*. While I had knelt there waiting – I had made up my mind what to do. I dressed myself and then I woke you both up and dressed you. *(Pauses)*. We set forth. It was a black, still night. Alternately dragging you along and carrying you – I walked five miles to the house of some friends. They took us in, and we remained there until I had seen my dead laid comfortably at rest. They lent me money to come North – I couldn’t bring you up – in the South. *(A silence)*. Always remember this: There never lived anywhere – or at any time – any two whiter or more beautiful souls. God gave me one for a husband and one for a son and I am proud. *(Brokenly)*. You – must – be – proud – too.” *(A long silence. Mrs. Loving bows her head in her hands. Tom controls himself with*

*effort. Rachel creeps softly to her mother, kneels beside her and lifts the hem of her dress to her lips. She does not dare touch her. She adores her with her eyes* (Grimké 25).

With the telling of her story, and the reaction of Rachel, Mrs. Loving a black woman becomes saintly, but not in the untouchable way of Du Bois's pageant characters or the sacrificial women of Locke's characters, but because she survived and maintains herself with a level of dignity and pride that black folk, according to the white constructions of blackness based on the science of race, were not supposed to be able to do. This characterization of Mrs. Loving is important because as the black race moved north, became educated and competitive in the job market, the white upper class turned to scientists to justify discrimination (California Newsreel (Firm) et al.). This is where the myth of race – ideology that one race is dominant over another race—begins to form scientific roots. To heal the trauma of lynching – also substantiated by the myth of race -- Mrs. Loving becomes storyteller and initiates her children as witnesses/listeners.

RACHEL: Ma dear, I am beginning to see – to understand – so much” (Grimké 27).

It is in the final pages of Act One that Grimké places the young child “Jimmy” in contrast with the young child “George.” In a few sentences, she draws the parallel of Jimmy and George.

RACHEL: If Jimmy went South now – and grew up – he might be – a George?” And who is George? George represents a young black male who admired his black father. His black father spoke out about an injustice and refused to be silent. George attempting to defend his black father, was hung, lynched on a tree branch beside his father. George is a young black male lynched by a mob of white church-going Christian people. Rachel goes on to postulate that the South is full of Jimmy's that will grow up to be George's. In drawing that correlation, Rachel

has an epiphany that lynching is an attack on mothers because no matter what protection they offer, little Jimmy's will grow to be George's.

Grimké extends her queering of black characters in this time period by intentionally linking meaning to the names of her characters. Rachel is derived from the barren wife of Jacob in the Bible; Mrs. Loving is the embodiment of love in action; John Strong is the embodiment of the head of the black family, a provider who stands strong and tall even under the weight of discrimination; Tom—also a symbolic name -- struggles to either become a John Strong or an Uncle Tom character, docile and amenable to his oppression. The name George is a diminutive moniker from the history of the Pullman Porters, given to black male porters by white men as a way of diminishing black man's individuality ("Pullman Porters, The"). Grimké doubles the refraction of society's self-image through specific choices of character names. By naming recognizable stereotypes then deconstructing them through development of plot and character, she manifests a queer space, in which stereotypes are examined. In 1897, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote "Strivings of the Negro People" in the Atlantic Monthly periodical (Bois). This article is the foundation for his theory of "Double Consciousness".

"...this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, --an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* 9)

Grimké's characters are the embodiment of that theory.

Act Two

Act Two begins four years later, “October sixteenth” (31), the anniversary at “seven o’clock in the morning” (31). The apartment is showing, “very evident improvements” (31). Red geranium plants adorn the shelf before each window. The green draperies are now paired with “fresh white dotted Swiss inner curtains” (31). New artwork also adorns the walls. A picture of “The Man With the Hoe” by Jean François Millet hangs on the wall between the doorway to the kitchenette and the other rooms. On another wall hangs George Frederic Watt’s “Hope” (31). An easy chair has been added and the tablecloth once green is white adorned with “a small asparagus fern” (31) in the center. In the stage directions, as in Act one, we also meet Rachel, “*with dishes and silver in her hands. She is clad in a bungalow apron. She is noticeably all of four years older. She frowns as she set the table. There is a set expression about the mouth*” (31). This description is notably different from our first initial meeting and impression of Rachel.

The first lines of dialogue re-introduce Jimmy, the young neighbor whom Rachel was so fond of and whom reminded Mrs. Loving of her son, George, lynched in the South years before. We hear Jimmy from the interior of the apartment this time, “Ma Rachel!” he says and appears from the doorway of one of the interior rooms of the apartment “half-dressed, breathless, and tremendously excited over something” (31). Grimké’s language, Jimmy calling Rachel “Ma Rachel” and Jimmy being “half-dressed” suggest a new living arrangement, or perhaps Jimmy has just spent the evening. The interaction between Rachel and Jimmy in the remaining of the scene suggests a transferal of innocence, from Rachel to Jimmy. Rachel now has a “set expression”, a “frown”, revealed only when she is alone on stage. As Jimmy enters the living area Rachel’s demeanor is masked as she involves herself in playing a guessing game with the Jimmy. The mask of double consciousness is tripled for black women as she is also expected to play a role even within her black community. They must play the roles of support to the black

man as he attempts to provide and protect for his family, the role of mother to black children and that of homemaker.

The moments when characters are alone onstage, juxtaposed with sharing the space, reveal that moments alone are moments of queer time and space. They are moments where the frames of white heteronormative family are broken and the characters are who they truly are, cracked, in pain, wrestling with identity and their performance of familial role, gender and blackness. Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote a poem that begins, “We wear the mask that grins and lies, it hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, -- ”(Dunbar 48). In these moments we see the black woman, man and child, without the mask, wrestling with the pain and frustration caused by experiencing racial prejudice and discrimination.

RACHEL: What is it, Jimmy boy?

JIMMY: Three guesses! Three guesses! Ma Rachel!

RACHEL: (*Her whole face softening*): Well, let’s see – maybe there is a circus in town.

JIMMY: No siree! (*in a sing-song*) You’re not right! You’re not right!

RACHEL: Well, maybe Ma Loving’s going to take you somewhere.

JIMMY: No! (*Vigorously shaking his head*) It’s –

RACHEL: (*interrupting quickly*) You said I could have three guesses, hone. I’ve only had two (32).

The game continues and Rachel takes the counting of wishes as an opportunity to teach Jimmy to count. The game continues and we learn that Jimmy is so excited because he took a bath “all by myself alone” (32) which he views as being “a ‘nawful, big boy now, aren’t I? I are almost a man, aren’t I?” (32). Rachel while proud of Jimmy fawns on him questioning what will she do if

he were to grow up so quickly? Jimmy reveals he is going to grow up, be a policeman, make lots of money and still be loved by “Ma Rachel”. He has dreams of showering Ma Rachel with gifts of “trains and fire-engines, and little, cunning ponies...” (33). The affection between this pair is confirmed with the Loving family tradition of “morning kiss”, a kiss on the forehead, as Jimmy, “(*tries to strangle her with hugs*)”(33). After further “Loving” inspection, Rachel sends Jimmy to wake Mrs. Loving and have her trim his fingernails but not before they realize Jimmy has put his shoes on the wrong feet. Jimmy says, “I thought they looked kind of queer, myself...”. With love and laughter Rachel and Jimmy correct the problem while celebrating Jimmy’s initiative. Rachel, now affecting a role of mother, is keen on Jimmy being clean and presentable and showers him with love and attention and sends Jimmy off, “...*he makes believe he is a horse, and goes prancing out of the room*” (34).

Mrs. Loving appears from a room off of the central room walking with a slight limp, “bent and worn-looking” (34). Mrs. Loving greets Rachel and inquires about Tom who “isn’t up yet” (34). Rachel tells Mrs. Loving how grown up Jimmy has been this morning and how proud of himself he is. As Mrs. Loving turns to follow after Jimmy and check the state in which he left the bathroom, Rachel comments on Mrs. Loving’s physical condition. “Rheumatism’s not much better this morning, Ma dear” (34). Mrs. Loving admits she did not use the liniment Rachel had purchased for her yesterday but also that the her joint pain and stiffness would ease, “As soon as I walk around a bit...” (35). Mrs. Loving also recalls the last few years and how Jimmy has come to stay with them. Both his parents contracted and died from smallpox nearly three years ago. Mrs. Loving imparts a mothers’ wisdom to Rachel. “When you are little, we mothers can kiss away all the trouble, but when you grow up—and go out—into the world—and get hurt—we are helpless. There is nothing we can do” (36). Mrs. Loving’s words not only address her motherly

concerns over her son Tom, but also foreshadows Rachel's path as Rachel assumes the role of "mother" to Jimmy.

After Mrs. Loving leaves to check on Jimmy, Tom enters and watches Rachel silently as she returns to setting the table. In this moment where Rachel believes she is alone her spirits settle, and she is visually grim. Tom noticing her dower demeanor comments, "Merry Sunshine! Have you, perhaps, been taking a—er—prolonged draught of that very delightful beverage—vinegar" (36). Rachel and Tom then also enjoy a jocular banter ending in Tom giving Rachel a kiss on the forehead, "morning's kiss". They both keep up their spirits for each other trying to spare one another from the growing weight that they feel of living as a colored person in America. In the moments these characters are alone onstage we witness this in their changed demeanor. Tom, after offering to help Rachel who denies his aid, sits and reads the morning paper. Since act one he has graduated college with an engineering degree but is still looking for a job.

Jimmy reenters with Mrs. Loving following shortly after. With the family in the room the focus rests on Jimmy, the innocent, who is engaged in play by Tom, Uncle Tom, as he is known to Jimmy. It seems the presence of Jimmy reminds and beckons them all to remember their playfulness and joy, and they all delight in his innocence. Mrs. Loving comments, "Tom, you're as big a child exactly as Jimmy" (40). Playing with Jimmy, the representation of innocence in the play, grants Tom and Rachel a reprieve from adulthood and knowing. This reprieve of games and laughter creates another queer space. This queer space of games and laughter is revisited throughout the play repeatedly pulling the characters to remember and practice their innate innocence.



Jimmy finishes his breakfast and asked to be excused from the table to finish getting ready to leave for school. It is in the absence of Jimmy that the room turns dower again. Tom makes note of the families predicaments. Mrs. Loving continues to work hard, “sewing—just so all of us may keep on living”; Rachel graduated at the top of her class but is not able to find a teaching job, and he is an electrical engineer yet has been searching unsuccessfully for a job for months. “It seems our educations aren’t of much use to us” (41). These ills of being black in America in 1916 are not much different from being black in America in the twenty-first century.

TOM: Their children [White people’s children] (our ages, some of them) are growing up around them; and they are having a square deal handed out to them—college, position, wealth, and best of all, freedom, without galling restrictions, to work out their own salvations. With ability, they may become—anything; and all this will be true of their children’s children after them. (*A pause*). Look at us—and look at them. We are destined to failure—they, to success. Their children shall grow up in hope; ours, in despair. Our hands are clean;--theirs are red with blood—red with the blood of a noble man—and a boy. They’re nothing but low, cowardly, bestial murderers. The scum of the earth shall succeed. –God’s justice, I suppose” (42).

Tom speaks of legacy and how Black families are prevented the opportunity to build legacy through a systematic blocking of opportunity to work and use their education. Mrs. Loving asks Tom, “promise...you’ll try—not to lose faith—in God” (42). Perhaps a suggestion of the difference in belief between the generations, however, Tom does promise to try not to lose his faith in God. Mrs. Loving leaves the room, as does Rachel to prepare to take Jimmy to school as she herself heads to the market to buy fabric for a client. Left alone, Tom, “(*...sits without*

*moving until he hears Mrs. Loving's voice within and Rachel's faintly; then he gets the paper, sits in the arm-chair and pretends to read*) (43). Angelina Weld Grimké's specific descriptions of the emotion of the character alone versus the character in community is a stage enactment of Du Bois' theory of double consciousness written in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. Grimké's character of Rachel is an example of a multitude of consciousness not just performing an expectation of the dominant and oppressive culture's idea of blackness but also performing a black male expectation of black womanhood which we later see in her interactions with John Strong.

Jimmy reenters and again he and Tom engage in play and Jimmy rewards Uncle Tom with kisses before exiting with Mrs. Loving for school. This moment, "Jimmy: *(puts his arms around Tom's neck and kisses him)* (44) is a mirrored image of a moment between Eva and Uncle Tom in the popular play *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In George Aiken's play the innocence of the little white child is passed to the old black slave, Uncle Tom, through a hug. Scholars equate this passing of innocence as symbolic of claiming the innocence of slavery (Mitchell). The juxtaposition of these images in a white American play and a black American play are worth further discussion for another paper but are worthy of note here.

Left alone onstage again, Tom returns to his dower introspection, lighting a cigarette that, unattended, burns out. Tom is only drawn out of his thoughts when Rachel enters to continue clearing the table. Next to enter is John Strong who is greeted warmly by the siblings. Rachel continues to clear the table and removes herself to the kitchenette side room while Tom and John talk. John inquires as to Tom's job search, which Tom shares that he has been unsuccessful, although he has been fervent in his search. John understands and shares his own story of graduating at the top of his class but unable to find work as an engineer until finally taking a job

as a waiter. John talks about his survival as a journey of adjustment. “I studied waiting; I made a science of it, an art” (45). John continues to share his journey to head-waiter, “...and I’m up against another stonewall. I’ve reached my limit. I’m thirty-two now, and I’ll die a head-waiter” (45). John continues to share his experiences of classmates frequenting the restaurant to see John and to “...tip me {him} well, extremely well—the larger the tip, the more pleased they are with me” (46). John describes their act of tipping as a sort of philanthropy for his former classmates but John’s “philosophy—learned hard, is to make the best of everything you can, and go on” (46). John ends his monologue with an offer to Tom to become a waiter where John is employed to provide for his family, for his mother in particular. Tom accepts the offer and they agree that he will start at the end of the week.

“...Vigorous rapping on the outer door of the flat...” (46) is answered by Rachel who ushers in a group of little Black girls on their way to school. They have stopped by to get “morning kiss” from Rachel who loves and attends to them all as mother to a child. They each clamor for her attention, “It’s my turn to get “Morning kiss” first, this morning, Miss Rachel. You kissed Louise first yesterday. You said you’d kiss us “alphabetically” (*Ending in a shriek*). You promised!” (47). Again we see Rachel’s proclivity for motherhood and caring for children. John and Tom observe all of this, and Rachel soon ushers the now happy group into the vestibule so they won’t be late for school.

After the children have left, Tom questions John,

TOM: Does it ever strike you—how pathetic and tragic a thing—a colored child is? (49).

John answers “Yes” and Tom exposes the difficulty of being colored by comparing living in the North and the South.

TOM: In the South, they make it impossible as they can for us to get an education...In the North, they make a pretense of liberality: they give us the ballot and a good education, and then—snuff us out. Each year, the problem just to live, gets more difficult to solve (49).

After agreeing, Tom makes his exit shortly after Rachel's reentry leaving Rachel to entertain John. John and Rachel are left alone in a silence until Rachel confesses that she heard John offer Tom a job.

RACHEL: I want to thank you for what you did for Tom... (50).

John inquires how Rachel's job hunt is going, to which Rachel's reveals a similar experience to Tom's except Rachel no longer has hope. She has resigned herself to the occasional sewing job and to tending to the home,

RACHEL: It's lucky for me that I love to keep house, and cook, and sew. I'll never get anything else (50).

John is perhaps not as resigned as Rachel,

JOHN: In the long run, do you believe, that attitude of mind—will be—beneficial to you? I'm ten years older than you. I tried your way. I know. Mine is the only sane one" (51).

John petitions Rachel for a date to see a show, professing his romantic interest in gestures, "*(Very deliberately, he turns her hand palm upwards, leans over and kisses it; then he puts it back in her lap)*" (52).

John exits leaving Rachel alone to ponder these new events. "*(She sighs happily, and after looking furtively around the room, lifts the palm John has kissed to her lips. She laughs shyly and jumping up, begins to hum...)*" (52). Rachel, with the prospect of love, has a shift in

her demeanor. She becomes light and hopeful again, similar to the Rachel we experience in act one at the start of the play. Her journey into imagining a future with John is interrupted by knocking at the door. Rachel ushers in a mother and daughter, “*a black woman, poorly dressed, and a little ugly, black child...The child is thin, nervous, suspicious, frightened*” (52). Angelina Weld Grimké exercises a theme of knocking that consistently interrupts Rachel’s dream state. Eventually the knocking thrusts Rachel from her dream life to the harsh lived reality of being black in America.

The woman knocking is Mrs. Lane. Mrs. Lane is in the building to rent a vacant flat and wanted to inquire with Rachel about the building and the local school. She goes on to tell Rachel that she is moving because of the experience her daughter, Ethel, had after two weeks at her previous school. Ethel as the only black girl in her school had been terrorized and singled out by her white teacher, which prompted similar treatment by the other white students. The repeated jeering and taunting of Ethel created the shell of a child that sat before Rachel. The character of Ethel is the theatrical opposite of the character of Jimmy. Ethel cowers behind her mothers skirt when Rachel greets her and bears, a “look of agony...” (54). Rachel offers the child a sliced apple on a plate, “*She [Ethel] makes no attempt to eat the apple, but holds the plate in her lap with a care that is painful to watch. Often, too, she looks over her shoulder fearfully*” (54). Rachel has never experienced a child that did not respond to her kindness with kindness and is visibly pained by Ethel. Mrs. Lane continues to recount Ethel’s experiences of schooling which involved, being “made to sit there [during recess] all alone—in that big room—because God made her ugly—and black” (56); having the other children after refusing to play with her, “one child came up and ran her hand roughly over Ethel’s face...” “It won’t come off! See!” Other

children followed the first child's example" and being called "Nigger" by the teacher first and then, under the encouragement of the teacher, by the students.

Mrs. Lane also offers her views, similar to those of Tom, "I'm going to have Ethel educated. Although, when you think of it, -- it's all rather useless—this education!..." (58). Mrs. Lane takes her critique further and advises Rachel to forgo marriage and child bearing because each year is harder than the last to live as a Black person in America. Before exiting Rachel attempts one more time to earn Ethel's favor and fails again as Ethel recoils from Rachel's offer of a hug and "morning's kiss".

After Mrs. Lane and Ethel's exit Rachel is delivered "a long flower box" with half a dozen "beautiful crimson rosebuds with long stems" (59). Rachel reads the card discovering they are from John and emotionally ping pongs between the dream of life with John and reality of Ethel Lane's story. Rachel questions the opposing experiences of the day and of the last four years.

RACHEL: Oh! John! John!—What are we to do?—I'm—I'm—afraid!  
 Everywhere—it is the same thing. My mother! My little brother! Little, black, crushed Ethel! *(In a whisper)* Oh! God! You who I have been taught to believe are so good, so beautiful how could—You permit—these—things? *(Pauses, raises her head and sees the rosebuds. Her face softens and grows beautiful...)*  
 (59).

Rachel turns from questioning God to embracing the beautiful idea of life wedded to John and raising a family. She addresses the rosebuds as "happy babies" (60) commenting on their God given beauty. Rachel resigns her questioning to favor God's wish of her having love and a family with John. Disrupting her mental and emotional debate is the, "sound of a small hand knocking

*at the outer door*” (60). Rachel answers the door and a sullen Jimmy enters however his spirits rise when he sees the rosebuds, and he petitions Rachel to put them in water. After doing so, Rachel attends to Jimmy who has “*climbs [ed] back into the chair. He looks thoughtful and serious*” (60). This is the first time Jimmy is left alone on the stage and we see him introspective. Upon Rachel’s return and after placing the vase of rosebuds centered on the table Jimmy pontificates how rosebuds are like “chilyun”...If you are good to them, they’ll grow into lovely roses...And if you hurt them, they’ll die. Ma Rachel do you think all people are kind to little rosebuds?...Ma Rachel, what is a “Nigger”?” (61). Rachel is taken aback by the seriousness of Jimmy’s remarks and questions him about it. Jimmy then recounts an experience of his day at school.

JIMMY: Some big boys called me that when I came out of school just now. They said: “Look at the little nigger!” And they laughed. One of them runned, no ranned, after me and threw stones; and they all kept calling “Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!” One stone struck me hard in the back, and it hurt awful bad; but I didn’t cry, Ma Rachel I wouldn’t let them make me cry. The stone hurts me there, Ma Rachel; but what they called me hurts and hurts here...” (61).

Rachel tries to avoid his questions but Jimmy seems to have an innate knowing that Rachel is trying to prevent him from feeling pain. Instead of addressing his question Rachel hugs him tight and offers him four cookies, two for him and two to share with Mary, another child who lives in the building. Rachel sends Jimmy off to play with Mary in an attempt to allow Jimmy to regain his innocence to re-member to play again. But Jimmy has passed through from the dream of childhood innocence to the reality of being a Black male in America, in one morning of schooling.

Remaining in the apartment Rachel is spiraled again into an argument comparing dream life and reality. “You God!—You terrible, laughing God! Listen! I swear—and may my soul be damned to all eternity, if I do break this oath—I swear—that no child of mine shall ever lie upon my breast, for I will not have it rise up, in the terrible days that are to be—and call me cursed” (63). Rachel ends the act by destroying the rosebuds, tearing them from their long stems and grinding them into the carpet beneath her feet. “If I kill, You Mighty God, I kill at once—I do not torture” (63). Rachel collapses after her rage of destroying the rosebuds with a swell of “(*...laughter of the children shrills loudly through the window*)” (63). Rachel links God to torture and to the torturing of Black people over years and across generations.

### Act Three

The start of Act Three, the final act of the play, occurs one week later, evening in the Loving residence. Tom sits reading, and Mrs. Loving is sewing. Coming from the side room off of the main room are the sounds of “(*...much laughter and the shrill screaming of a child...*)” (67). Rachel and Jimmy are having a pillow fight. Tom comments on how “giddy” Rachel is but Mrs. Loving is worried by it. Mrs. Loving warns Rachel about exciting Jimmy so much just before bedtime. Rachel conforms and she and Jimmy curl up in a big armchair Tom has helped Rachel push close to the fireplace. As Rachel and Jimmy settle by the fire, Jimmy requests, “tell me a story, please. It’s “story-time,” now, isn’t it?” (69). Rachel tells a story of the “Land of Laughter” (70), a story previously written by Angelina Weld Grimké and incorporated into this play. “Land of Laughter” is about two small boys who, “lived with a cruel, old man and woman, who made them work hard, very hard—all day, and beat them when they did not move fast enough, and always, every night, before they went to bed. They slept in an attic on a rickety, narrow bed...in summer, they nearly died with the heat up there, and in winter, with the cold”



(69). One night an old woman with “a pleasant voice” (69) appeared in the attic and asked the boys why they were crying. The boys told the old woman, “Because we are tired and sore and hungry and cold; and we are all alone in the world; and we don’t know how to laugh anymore”

(69). The old woman told them they must travel to the Land of Laughter and gave them instructions to, “...go out the eastern gate of town, just as the sun is rising; and you take the highway there, and follow it; and if you go with it long enough, it will bring you to the very gates of the Land of Laughter. It’s a long, long way from here; and it will take you many days” (70) and then she disappeared. In the story the boys agreed to leave for the Land of Laughter the next morning. Along their journey the boys met three men, each tempted the boys to enter a different land. They offered access to the “Land of Riches”, the “Land of Power” and the “Land of Sacrifice and Suffering”. The boys decline each and continue on the road towards the Land of Laughter but when they reach the gates they are asked by the woman gatekeeper, “Let me see you smile, first” (72). The boys make a pitiful attempt and are instructed to go away and practice. For three days the boys practice smiling and sleep by the roadside. The third morning they return to the gate and smile for the gatekeeper who finally approves their smiles and allows them passage into the Land of Laughter. “Never had they seen such blue skies, such green trees and grass; never had they heard such bird songs. And people, men, women, and children, laughing softly, came to meet them, and took them in, and made them at home...” (72).

Jimmy remarks of the story, “It makes you think...of sunshine medicine...You’d—never—be—afraid there...Never afraid of nothing?...Oh I wish I was there” (74). Rachel is now crying but she tells Jimmy they are tears of joy. Jimmy asks for Rachel to play a lullaby on the piano and eventually Rachel acquiesces.

*“(She twists up her hair into a knot at the back of her head and looks at the keys for a few moments; then she plays the accompaniment of the “Slumber Boat”, through softly, and, after a moment, sings. Her voice is full of pent-up longing, and heartbreak, and hopelessness. She ends in a little sob, but attempts to cover it by singing, lightly and daintily, the chorus of “The Owl and the Moon”. Then softly and with infinite tenderness, almost against her will, she plays and sings again the refrain of the “Slumber Boat”):*

“Sail, baby, sail  
 Out from that sea,  
 Only don’t forget to sail  
 Back again to me.” (75).

Jimmy promises to go tonight to the Land of Laughter in the Slumber Boat and to return the next day and tell Rachel all about it. Tom interjects Rachel and Jimmy with news that John Strong will be paying Rachel a visit tonight. Rachel, *“stiffens perceptively”* then returns her attention to Jimmy asking him not to leave for the Land of Laughter without her. Jimmy agrees, *“I guess I couldn’t smile if my Ma Rachel wasn’t somewhere close to me”* (76). Jimmy, under the direction of Rachel, kisses Mrs. Loving and Uncle Tom goodnight. Rachel then takes Jimmy by the hand and prepares to exit but hesitates to ask Tom whether he will be at home when John comes calling and then exits to put Jimmy to bed.

In the absence of Jimmy and Rachel, Mrs. Loving voices her concern about Rachel’s demeanor since she was found unconscious in the apartment. Exactly what happened is still a mystery. Rachel has kept silent about the event. Mrs. Loving notes that Rachel hardly lets Jimmy out of her sight and is *“nervous and excited”* (78) while he is at school. Mrs. Loving also notes

Rachel's appearance as, "face pale and haggard and black hollows under her eyes" (78). Mrs. Loving tells Tom at night Jimmy wakes up crying and Rachel is the only one to calm him. She goes to Jimmy and "soothes him until, at last, he falls asleep again. Every time she has come out like a rag; and her face is like a dead woman's" (79). Tom agrees, "...something terrible and sudden has hurt her soul" (79) but regretfully Rachel has not confided in him as she used to.

Tom exits the apartment and Rachel reenters informing Mrs. Loving that Jimmy is "sleeping like a top" (79). Mrs. Loving announces that she will also be leaving tonight "for a short time about half-past eight" (79). Rachel voices regret to Mrs. Loving that they won't be having a nice quiet evening together. Rachel's nervousness alarms Mrs. Loving who voices her concern to Rachel. A package of cloth is delivered to the apartment followed by the sound of "many loud knocks made by numerous small fists" (80), it is the children from the building seeking to say goodnight to Rachel. Once more children surround Rachel vying for her loving attention. "Goo-night! Sweet dreams! God keep you all the night" are the words Rachel uses as she disappears with them into the vestibule presumably guiding them to their respective homes.

*"The bell presently rings three distinct times"* (82) the signature ring of John Strong. Mrs. Loving lets him into the apartment and after pleasantries they begin to discuss the events of last week trying to surmise what led up to Rachel's discovered state of unconsciousness. John learns of the rosebuds strewn about and ground into the floor, but Mrs. Loving does not know who sent them because she did not find a card. The event remains a mystery to Mrs. Loving. Rachel enters greeting John but senses a seriousness in the room.

"RACHEL: ...Who's dead?"

MRS. LOVING: Dead, Rachel?

RACHEL: Yes. The atmosphere here is so funereal, --it's positively crapey

STRONG: I don't know why it should be—I was just asking how you are.

RACHEL: Heavens! Does the mere inquiry into my health precipitate such an atmosphere?" (85).

Mrs. Loving excuses herself to get ready to leave the apartment leaving John and Rachel alone. Rachel nervously makes a joke about using her etiquette training to be a good hostess to John in her mother's absence. Rachel begins by asking about the weather but John refuses to play the game. Mrs. Loving now ready to leave exits the apartment. John Strong is slow and sure in his approach to Rachel.

JOHN: A nice warm room--shut in—curtains drawn—a cheerful fire crackling at my back..."(87)

his demeanor seems to counter Rachel's nervousness. John is preparing to ask Rachel about the rosebuds. He offers his listening ear,

JOHN: Wouldn't it be easier for you, little girl, if you could tell—some one?" (88).

He inquires whether she liked the roses or dislike the giver trying to understand why she destroyed them. Rachel tries to explain,

RACHEL: ...It hurts --too much—to talk about it yet, --please" (89). John quietly presses her for information, "*(Takes her hand; looks at it a few minutes and then at her quietly)*. You—don't—care, then? Rachel! --Look at me, little girl!" (89).

John then takes her hands in his and begins kissing them. Rachel is beyond nervous and wrenches her hands from his and tries to lighten the conversation and the mood calling upon her etiquette training. She suggests singing a song, or playing the piano. Rachel escapes to the upright and begins playing and singing "At Twilight".

“The roses of yester-year  
 Were all of white and red;  
 It fills my heart with silent fear  
 To find all their beauty fled.

The roses of white are sere,  
 All faded the roses red,  
 And one who loves me is not here  
 And one that I love is dead” (90).

This is an interesting song with interesting lyrics for Rachel to sing at such a tense moment of the play between two would-be lovers. Through the lyrics she sings of aging love and its inevitable death. John, however, is not deterred.

JOHN: Little girl, little girl, don't you know that suggestions—suggestions—like those you are sending yourself constantly—are wicked things? You, who are so gentle, so loving, so warm (90).

John's continual referencing to Rachel as little girl is vexing to me. Perhaps because a young black girl becomes a woman when she marries and begins her own family. Given the time period in which this was written the fact that Rachel eventually turns away from John Strong, is substantial. He is “Strong”. He is the one who is “knowing” as he tells Rachel earlier.

JOHN: I am ten years older than you. My way is the best way.

This is radical black female subjectivity as Rachel, the young vibrant black woman, turns away from the “strong” black man who offers a ready-made nest for her to alight, as a small bird, into and begin laying eggs of children. He has an idea of life that he wants, and she fits into it in a

specific way. Rachel turns away from John not because she doesn't love him but because she cannot in good conscious fulfill his dream of bearing him children. Children that she knows will only suffer if brought into this world as it is today; children born as "Jimmy" who will grow up to be "George". John could agree to live and love Rachel as she is with Jimmy as his foster and/or adopted son. There would also be the many children that look to Rachel everyday for motherly love. I access that the pitter-pattering of the feet of adopted children may not be satisfactory for John Strong because he eventually leaves Rachel when she does not acquiesce, to his dream of family life.

Rachel, falling into nervous laughter as John continues to woo her with kisses spurts out,

RACHEL: God is laughing—We're his puppets.—He pulls the wires,--and we're so funny to Him.

Then in the midst of what must have appeared to be madness from Rachel,

RACHEL: —I'm laughing too—because I can hear—my little children—weeping. They come to me generally while I'm asleep,--but I can hear them now.—They've begged me—do you understand?—begged me --not to bring them here;--and I've promised them—not to.—I've promised. I can't stand the sound of their crying.—I have to laugh--...I can't drown their weeping (91).

John is beside himself, grabs Rachel as to shake her back to him and to his dream. He tells her about "a little flat on 43<sup>rd</sup> Street" (91) that he has rented but never lived in. He has spent the last year furnishing the apartment, picking out every little detail from the rugs and draperies to the dishes, artwork and silverware.

JOHN: Little girl, do you know for whom they are waiting? And somewhere—there's a big, strong man—with broad shoulders. And he's willing and anxious to

do anything—everything, and he’s willing and anxious to do anything—  
everything, and he’s waiting very patiently. Little girl, is it to be—yes or no? (92).

Rachel is not immune to Strong’s efforts. In fact, she is sensually warmed by his efforts, “*(life has come flooding back to her. Her eyes are shining; her face, eager. For a moment she is beautifully happy)*” (92). Rachel accepts with a repeated yes and requests for John to take her, to rescue her quickly before she changes her mind. She wants to, “forget everything” (93). Before John can sweep her away and before she can step fully into the dream, Jimmy is heard crying from the inner bedroom and Rachel must go to him. She returns shortly and tells John why Jimmy at only seven years old, has been waking up crying every night with nightmares of being taunted by white boys throwing rocks and verbal slurs at him as he ran home.

RACHEL: In a year or two, at best, he will be made old by suffering (93).

The knocking now replaced by crying, Jimmy begins to weep again and Rachel assures,

RACHEL: Honey, I’m right here. I’m coming in just a minute. Don’t cry (94).

Rachel tries to impress upon John her deepest feelings about bringing children into this world comparing that to how she can barely stand the crying of Jimmy.

RACHEL: Ever since I fell here—a week ago—I am afraid—to go—to sleep, for every time I do—my children come—and beg me—weeping—not to—bring them here—to suffer (94).

Rachel explains again her promise to them then before going to Jimmy who has begun to cry again,

RACHEL: ...dear John—you see—it can never be—all the beautiful, beautiful things—you have told me about. No—they—can never be—now. No,—John dear, --you—must not—touch me—any more. Dear, this —is—Good-bye (95).

John counts her demeanor as a reason to wait for her answer and offers her the opportunity to take time to rethink her answer, but Rachel dismisses the offer standing firm to her decision. It is determined between them that Rachel does care very much for John and vice versa, but they have come to an impasse. Without resolve John bids Rachel farewell and God's blessing and exits. "*There is finality in the sound*" of the door closing and in a "*sudden cry*. John!" (95).

Rachel runs out into the vestibule after John, but he is gone. She returns.

RACHEL: "No—No sunshine—no laughter—always, always, darkness. That is it. Even out little flat—John's and mine—the little flat—that calls, calls us—through darkness. It shall wait..." (95).

In her final moments alone Rachel again commits herself to childlessness as a promise to her unborn children which call to her in the darkness of night begging not to be born into this world. Jimmy, from the exterior room begins to weep again and it is with resolve that Rachel, having taken steps to keep her promise, exits to tend to him.

End of play

### **Black Feminist Core Theme Analysis: Self-Defining Voice**

*Rachel* was first submitted to the NAACP the *Crisis* magazine Play Competition. Its selection as winner is said to be the shock wave that created the fission of Black theater into two distinct Black theater ideologies mentioned earlier; the W.E.B. Du Bois School of Black Experience and the Alain Locke School of Black Art. Disagreements between Du Bois and Locke over the selection of this play led Locke to resign from the NAACP play selection committee and begin the theater program at Howard University in Washington, D.C. The play revealed their opposing thoughts on the purpose of theater – to teach white people the humanity of black people or creating theater that is a reflection of black people for black audiences. The



first production of *Rachel* was March 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> at the Myrtilla Miner Normal School in Washington, D.C. in 1916. The second production was at the Neighborhood Playhouse in Manhattan, New York in April of 1917. The third and final production of the time period was at St. Bartholomew's Church on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1917 (Hull 119).

Angelina Weld Grimké received grateful praise through letters from her friends after seeing the production. One such praise excerpted from the March 19, 1917 edition of the *Washington Post* congratulated her on, "laying bare the real soul of our race and in depicting with accuracy its daily agonies" (Hull). A reviewer from the *Washington Post*, Ralph Graves compared the character of Rachel to 'Blanchette' of the French dramatist Brieux's work. "...educated above her normal social station, finds herself in hopeless conflict with her family and her surroundings" (Hull). He also wrote, "Rachel is surcharged with danger if presented on the stage indiscriminately before audiences of subnormal powers of differentiation and analysis, but if published it would have a wide field of missionary usefulness" (Hull). What did he mean by that? Was it difficult to watch black people "above their normal [expected] social station" onstage? Or that people would interpret the playwright's message as advising black women not to procreate? Perhaps he was referring to the dangers of portraying a black person, black woman who does not fit into the white constructions of blackness that were heavily produced in this time period. Other criticism went further by claiming Angelina Weld Grimké's Loving family was far removed from the Negroes they knew and the writing was overdramatic (Hull 121). The reviewers, white men and at least one white woman, seemed to miss the commentary on the power of racial prejudice to inhibit advancement in the lives of Black Americans. From the play program, "This is the first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of ten million of colored citizens in this

free Republic” (Hull 117). I believe this was Du Bois’ purpose for the production of *Rachel* and several scholars support this idea.

“Now the purpose was to show how a refined, sensitive, highly-strung girl, a dreamer and an idealist, the strongest instinct in whose nature is a love for children and a desire some day to be a mother herself—how this girl would react to this force [racial prejudice]” (Hull 117).

Grimké’s quote adds the voice of the black girl and further describes her as sensitive, a dreamer and idealist and strong instincts towards motherhood. I find it interesting that her descriptions do not mention the black girl in relation to the black man. The black girl stands on her own as a thinking, processing, feeling being with a conscious to react to her surroundings. This character definition was and is revolutionary. Suzan Lori Parks, a twenty first century black, female playwright who has achieved critical acclaim with productions on Broadway and across the country wrote an essay, *The Equation of Black People Onstage*, in which she describes, “The bulk of relationships Black people are engaged in onstage is the relationship between the Black and the White other” (Parks 19). Grimké, in 1914, determined this to be true and wrote *Rachel*, with an all black cast, removing the white other; Grimké goes even further to begin the removal of the black woman from the other “other”, the black man, beginning a new aesthetic of the black feminist play that centers the experience and voice of the black woman.

A core theme in Black feminist theory is the power of self-definition. Scholars of Black feminist theory break this theme into two sections, the voice and space (Collins 109–111). The power of self definition is a key component because it is the moment where there is a shift in the power where the watcher having developed a double consciousness (Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*; Michelle Smith) shares their other personality which might have been limited to the safe and private spaces which are specific avenues of self-definition. Self-defining is an act of

resistance on the part of black feminists in order to stand up underneath and maintain a sacred self under the oppressive powers of a dominant group. Self-definition is the person we see when the mask is removed and placed on the hallway table by the door waiting for the next time that person goes out into the oppressive space. It is set on the hallway table as the person enters into the safe, sacred and private spaces where the oppressed people, in this case black women, can harness and use their voice, discuss and practice acts of resistance. It is where they shed the mask of dual and tri-consciousness and sit in the self that is true and is designed by them and only them. Thus, the importance of self-defining is how black women maintain and grow their own ideas of self and personhood. It is a space that requires and nurtures the remembrance of our black women's history of struggle as well as of joy. In these private spaces, the rules or expectations of the dominant oppressive class can be ignored without consequence and possibly ignored with celebration.

In *Rachel*, when characters are alone, their true state of feeling is revealed to the audience through their expressions, including Rachel. However Rachel also has a voice in her moments alone on stage, which is the voice that is key to this research because it is when Rachel -- a black woman -- wrestles with defining her self instead of assuming the roles built for her.

### **Live Readings with Community of Black Women**

On a Sunday afternoon in Chicago nine women gathered in a home in the Lincoln Park area to read aloud Angelina Weld Grimké's play, *Rachel*. Four women were members of the Honey Pot Performance collective in Chicago. I was unfamiliar with most of the women so the gathering began with introductions. In addition to the women from the Honey Pot Performance collective; two women were faculty from Columbia College; one was a social worker, and a

young ballet dancer training in the summer program at Joffrey Ballet who I specifically asked to participate by reading the role of Rachel. This is the first reading that included professional dance, theater and performance artists.

This reading was challenging because of the length of the play, 3 hours just to read. I was working with professionals whom I perceive as potentially having a production-oriented investment in this reading. I presented myself as not only a scholar but as an artist and future collaborator of the Honey Pot Performance collective. This reading stood apart because of these factors but became a clearly different event for me as I prepared the space the day prior. The event was held in the home of my Chicago host and partner. She was also instrumental in pairing me with Honey Pot Performance collective. We prepared the living room area by setting candles and pillows, moving furniture and preparing the food area. I was creating a certain environment for the women to come into. It was already a woman-centered home because my partner, a single-mother, designed her home décor with touches specific to her as a woman, dancer and choreographer. Her home is designed as a respite from a busy career. A portrait of a dragon rearing upward hangs centered on a red door. A blue wall greets you as you cross into the home stimulating a calming and welcoming effect as you remove your coat and shoes. The walls are brick like a cottage in the countryside, and adorning the walls are oversize portraits and paintings of her children and her self in moments elucidating familial love and affection. There are also production photos of her work as dancer and performance artist with a penchant for site-specific work. Intermingled with the photographs are remnants of nature, curved wood and healthy green plants effectively bringing the warmth and nurturing of mother earth into the home. Amongst the plants if you look closely you will denote small glasses of liquid – offerings to spirit guides. To my partner, her children, to me and to anyone entering, this is a sanctuary, a sacred space.

Having been in the space for three days before the reading, I had grown accustomed to the warmth, but as we set the table with plastic ware and paper plates, I stopped. I need the warmth and welcome to continue to the food as well. We swapped out the paper and plastic for earthenware plates, silverware and glasses for the wine. The eating needed to be as communal and as welcoming as the home. It should encourage people to pass plates and feel like they are in the home of a trusted friend and/or family member who is not concerned with the cleanup or the possibility of a broken glass. With that switch the meal became a form of family style, which spoke to the original nature of how these plays were heard and passed on in the early 1900's. Plastic plates and flatware were not available in the early 1900's. The earthenware matched the décor of the home and for a play reading that is at least three hours long, I needed focus to be on the play and the discussion, not on whether the plate would hold the meal. In hindsight, earthenware/clay, silverware and glass are also elements from the earth. I believe the ancestors required such a specific connection to allow the energy of the storytelling, the witnessing, the embodiment, the voice, to flow uninhibited between them and us, us and them. This type of attention to ancestry is also specific to my black feminist aesthetic.

After introductions, we took a small break to refill water glasses and to meet each other informally. I gathered and began distributing the scripts while checking on the macaroni and cheese I prepared and the chicken wings that my host prepared. Wine glasses were filled and we sat to discuss the casting. Two women gravitated towards two roles and the remainder, excepting Rachel who was already cast; were disseminated. I read the stage directions. After an hour, we came to the end of act one and took a break, to eat and drink. Some conversation ensued as we filled our plates and glasses and returned to the living room to eat. I was asked if I was going to direct a production of this play, "I'm open to it but first is to explore this format of reading the

play”.

I asked the youngest member her impressions of reading the voice of Rachel, a verbose and precocious Black female character written at the turn of the twentieth century,

“I really relate to her [Rachel]. I like being her character because I relate to her. In the way that she is always umm, curious and thinking about – like she’s an old spirit. And the way she talks to her mom is the way I talk to my mom. And I’m always like wondering and asking about things that are like higher than my age level and so as I’m reading her I feel like I’m just being my self. Umm, And she’s really funny. Umm but I just I feel like I’m reading- like, we’re very very similar and I can relate to her so well. I like playing her character.”

After reading one act, Angelina Weld Grimké’s character, Rachel has found a kindred spirit in a young Black woman of the twenty first century suggesting the content and the voice remains relevant a century later.

We began again and powered through acts two and three in the next two hours. Post-reading, the mood in the room felt thick and heavy. It was into the 9 o’clock hour and the women were noticeably tired. Whether it was from the reading or from their busy schedules of the week, I am unsure. “How is this sitting in your bodies?” was my initial question to begin the post-reading discussion. The first responses were of tension and conflict. Tension physically manifested in the neck and shoulders relating to the play’s depiction of social injustices in 1916 which are eerily accurate for black people in contemporary society. There was conflict over the question the play poses of whether or not to bring black children into a world that actively participates in institutional and systematic racism against people of color, specifically black people.

Twenty-five minutes into the discussion and not everyone had offered a comment and the majority of us were sporadically yawning. “Any final thought? We've been here a long time. So. Ya'll have my email if anything comes up please feel free to email me and I'll give you my information- even if it's like throwing up on the page I would love to read it, you know. Let me know if it filters thru you in the coming days and stuff you come across. (Thank you) yeah, I thank you for your time and energy and focus in getting thru this cuz' it is a long play and it's dense, the language and all that. So thank you so much.” The room sat still for a moment and then the discussion began to flow and filled the next hour with discussion on:

- Systematic and institutional racism in education, housing, justice and health care
- Surmised through descriptions of location in the text, the Chicago is the “northern city” (1) setting of the play.
- Black women as the sacrificial rock and emotional foundation for the family
- “I found my thinking about the losses in the sense of children and thinking about the work I do now. Like how you can begin to see a light go out of children’s eyes by the time they get to middle school –somewhere in between the fourth grade, fifth grade and uhm, there’s such a difference between K-2 as we get up into where they are becoming what they are going to become.” (*Rachel Post-Reading Discussion*)
- Is killing the child or yourself better than raising them in this world? Correlations to later literary works, ie. Toni Morrison’s “Beloved”
- PTSD symptoms from experiencing racism developing in the characters as the play traverses four years. Especially the stress beginning on the children at a young age.

- “haunting. Like it makes me think about what that word means to feel haunted by, you know, the cycles of it all. I'm thinking about what a theme that is, even though it didn't happen like that in this, what a literary theme that is or even a theme in the media like, young, poor mother, strangles children, leaves child in a garbage can, abandons children, you know - it's a repeated and repetitive story the. Beloved story's -- the repetition of that and on some level the idea that like the irony of him talking about being a waiter and serving his classmates and then as the years go on the irony in that moment and how many times I've heard that story and so it's haunting, like echoes hum, the way that it echoes, you hear it and the way that it echoes in all these other versions...” (*Rachel Post-Reading Discussion*)
- cycles of trauma in the history of Black Americans and the notion of “blood memory” (*Rachel Post-Reading Discussion*) and carrying that trauma in our DNA across generations.
- The unique cadences of Rachel’s voice which place her between reality and a dream like state or world, suggesting for some a type of fragility in her character
- Debate over the length: if contemporized it could be shorter and endure some script cuts versus the script needing to be this long because it takes that long for an audience to process Rachel’s the decision of not bringing children into this world even though motherhood was what she felt she was born to do
- The choice not to have children as a choice based in logic not emotion or fragility however that logical decision can also be traumatic
- The form of gathering and reading the play felt important and necessary as we



finished reading and as we are in the discussion because content like this is often presented in public spaces with varying ethnicities, “I guess I'm also thinking about us, sitting here in this room for this amount of time and the incongruity of that with our daily lives, like in the incongruity of having -- of spending this much time and having this type of content outside of --- I feel like I've only ever experienced content like this, in public. You go out to a play, you see it in a movie theater, you hear it in a song you see, see in a video it's usually in public. And often actually in mixed company in terms of mixed racial company” (*Rachel Post-Reading Discussion*)

- Colorism through labeling. Questioning Rachel’s distinguishing between “black” and “brown” babies. What skin color/shade of black or brown is Rachel and her family?
- Specificity of the stage directions and starkly opposite choice of colors in the set design and the selection of artwork hanging in the apartment.
- Mr. Strong ‘s love of/for the idea of Rachel and how Rachel pushes against it and also submits to it.
- Similarities between Sharon Bridgeforth’s new show we saw that weekend “River See” (Bridgeforth). “...there's an interesting parallel in having seen *River See* and listening to this. Because this feels like young mother, a generation hence from lynching deciding whether or not to have a child and *River See* was ... a child deciding whether or not to come [through] to be born. (Verbal affirmations) for the same reason?: That's my soon come day [day of birth], right? Right.

PARTICIPANT 1: and that again was a woman arriving north- the body that the

child's spirit was going in to. ...her husband was lynched. PARTICIPANT 2: and Rachel is talking about having these relationships with her unborn children—  
PARTICIPANT 3: --yes, she is. --” (*Rachel Post-Reading Discussion*).

Also of interest is that one member mistook Jean François Millet whose paintings were listed in the stage directions as adorning the walls with Edna St. Vincent Millet, a controversial, anti-war, anti-government poet of the time period. I thought it interesting that she drew those correlations that may have also informed Angelina Weld Grimké.

We said our goodbyes with hugs. We had shared an experience together for three hours. Phone numbers were exchanged between those of us just meeting while plates and glasses were gathered and relocated to the kitchen. Shoes were slipped into as the women exited in groups as they had come. The door closed and I, and my partner silently embraced. She had seen me in my directorial, black feminist, theater artist mode, which I am protective over because it is a place of extreme vulnerability usually reserved for the rehearsal room. My foray into this new realm of embodiment requires me to be vulnerable faster with new people and in new ways.

### **Autoethnographic Account**

This autoethnographic account stems from a lived experience and the correlations between the choices I made and the choices the character Rachel makes in Angelina Weld Grimké’s play. Below is a poetic account of real events.

Sitting in the 9<sup>th</sup> floor Recovery Lounge. My mom is in Pre-Surgery being prepped to repair a fracture in her femoral bone. Pre-surgery prep. My older brother is with her she meets with the doctor,  
What is your name?

Which leg needs the surgery?

Any drugs or allergies?

Do you wear glasses?

My mom will eventually drift under the anesthesia.

I in the 9<sup>th</sup> floor Recovery room. My big brother in Pre-Surgery Prep with my mother and the doctor. I am jumbled. Both beneath the skin and my mind observing outside my skin, watching observing the rising temperature in my face and the weight with which the dark eye circles flex and twitch to restrain the tears -- or to usher them, I don't know.

Recognizing my "familial identity": daughter, second born, responsible, caretaker. and "gender politics identity": Black woman, girl, who steps back to let man/boy/older brother of our deceased father-family lead, tempered my boldness, directness, leader self so that he might have a place in spotlight, so that he might lead the Black family as our Christian God intended.

I didn't mean to do that – "step back". I did the Google search on her procedure making *me* the expert to question the surgeon, to make sure he knew that I knew that he knew what he knew and could do what he does everyday, several times a day with, accuracy that I, now an expert, would be..be...you understand my meaning.

I didn't mean to take that – "step back".

Sitting in the 9<sup>th</sup> floor Recovery Lounge, grappling with my identity. With the roles I play. How I am required to play them. How I am expected to play them. How I play them. And in this case, how they play me. I didn't mean to take that – "step back". I want to play that scene again, but the moment is over. I am sitting in the 9<sup>th</sup> Floor recovery room – flooding with regret sitting just behind my eyes.

Used in performance studies and in the forming of Black feminist theatrical aesthetic, embodied practice – here in the form of reading a role aloud – is akin to borrowing an outfit, trying on shoes for a specific period of time to see if they really fit or not. The person reading the role is able to practice what it might be like to live and make choices as this person. As an actor develops the body shape, voice inflection, eye movement and other specifics of how to play a role, the reader in a shortened practicum, gets to experience the emotional journey, the questions the grappling with life that the author has set up for the character. In the case of *Rachel*, the actor practices with her voice, inflection and perhaps body, the action of forming an identity of self. For young black women in the early 1900's, this is a radical act of resistance. Although critics of *Rachel* thought Angelina Weld Grimké was purporting “race genocide,” I believe Grimké used the character of Rachel to animate young black women creating their own identities of being a black woman in America. Grimké, through the character of Rachel, empowers and informs young black women to believe that they do have the power of choice for their lives.

Now what does that have to do with today? Through Grimké's character, readers and young black women in particular can safely rail against God, societal norms and ideas of black female identity. In this embodied practice through character work, the reader is practicing the development of their own voice and their own power to self-define. *Rachel* models the potential for young black women to practice the development of their own voices, their own choices and identities.

This practice of embodiment offers a two-fold return. First the reader experiences black history and storytelling through the characters, plot and journeys of fictitious characters who are reflections of black American history waiting to be filled with narrative; second, the reader

practices another's journey of choosing, which in turn, is an exercise towards practicing their own. Rachel's choice is a denial of one of her deepest desires but it is her own choice.

If I had had the embodied practice of reading *Rachel* as a young woman, of playing the role of Rachel of trying on this exercise of acknowledging my reality, of developing a voice which sits in opposition to the current space of black women's roles and identities, perhaps I would not have "stepped back" in the situation in the hospital. Perhaps I would have declared myself to be the one to go into pre-surgery with my mom, to meet her surgeon to have my questions answered and tell my mom "I love you" before she drifted under the anesthesia. Perhaps I would not have sat in the 9<sup>th</sup> Floor Recovery Lounge brimming with regret and a well of tears sitting just behind my eyes. Perhaps I would have stood in the fullness of me as a Black woman, and as a daughter and not defaulted. Who knows? bell hooks says, "Being oppressed means the absence of choices" (hooks 5). By creating readings of these early 1900's plays in private spaces we are creating a practice of creating choices for ourselves that is an act of contemporary resistance built on a century old foundation.

## **Conclusion**

The character of Rachel gives witness to the formation of a collective voice. The character questions the two roles defined for her by exterior and dominant forces of white patriarchy and black male patriarchy. While resisting those walls that threaten to collapse on her from all sides she, Rachel, becomes black women's collective and self-defining voice. Rachel vocalizes the designated roles as a black woman. One is to marry and procreate, which is presented through the character of Mr. John Strong. The second is through the white male racist patriarch who confines her to joblessness beyond higher education. Having a degree but not

permitted to work or be hired because of discrimination in society against black people and in particular black women. The pressure of conformity provided by John Strong is for Rachel to become a wife and mother to his children. John Strong presents a viable option for creating a life that to white people would be non-threatening so that black people, black men in particular, could contribute to society and portray and exercise family values. Rachel is naturally inclined to care for a family, however she is observant of the racial experience of being a black person in America. Knowing these ideas she is conflicted about bringing more black babies into this world only to die at the hands of lynch mobs of white people or to be trapped in low-paying jobs even if well-educated for higher positions. It becomes her mission to love the black children who are already here as they experience racism and are scarred by the age of seven, such as the character of Jimmy. Rachel is articulating in speech and in action a collective black woman's voice of resistance sitting in opposition to the boxes of structured identities formed for her by others. In finding her voice to resist these structures Angelina Weld Grimké through Rachel is defining her own voice. Angelina Weld Grimké was a woman who deviated from the prescribed role – such as avoiding marriage and preferring to love women -- but locked that part of her away so as not to dishonor or bring shame to her father whom she loved dearly.

“Black writers, of whatever quality, who step outside the pale of what black writers are supposed to write about, or who black writers are supposed to be, are condemned to silences in black literary circles that are as total and as destructive as any imposed by racism. That is particularly true for black women writers who have refused to be delineated by male-establishment models of femininity, and who have dealt with their sexuality as an accepted part of their identity. . . .” (Tate 100–16).

Rachel's struggle and voice is also Grimké's. Rachel is not only black women's collective voice but individually is Grimké's mouthpiece/voice yearning for a different option to what was presented as acceptable at the time. As Rachel locked away her desire for motherhood, Angelina locked away her desire to love women.

*Rachel* is a play with content of depth relevant to the time period it was written as a historical container of Black history and American history as well as an instructional guide for contemporary black life. The results of the reading produced a pool of shared knowledge by black women. Comparisons are drawn between what it is to be black in America in the twenty-first century and being black in the early twentieth century – which, unfortunately, is not too different. The injustices expressed in the play remain prevalent for Black Americans today so perhaps the self-defining decision Rachel makes might be a guide for contemporary young black women to self-define.

The play also acts as a guide for contemporary black female playwrights in presenting queer black feminist theatre aesthetics and ideas. Grimké does so by queering the space in which the action of the play develops and by queering the space within the mind of Rachel. She portrays Rachel as a deeply thoughtful and fully emotive young black woman with agency over her own life. Grimké queers the character of Rachel as existing outside white constructions of blackness. Grimké also queers the supporting characters of Tom and Jimmy by creating identities that not so subtly subvert two stereotypes popularized in minstrel shows – Uncle Tom and Topsy the Pickaninny. Finally Grimké queers Mrs. Loving and John Strong by creating in them characters who are incarnations of their names. Loving and Strong are two descriptors that were not apart of the reigning stereotypes for black people in the 1800's and early 1900's. These elements are both black feminist and queer creating a queer black feminist theatre aesthetic.





**Chapter 6**

*To Be American: Bifurcation of Black Women's Activism in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's "Mine Eyes Have Seen"*

Alice Dunbar-Nelson's play *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, published in *The Crisis* magazine, has a strong theme of American patriotism. In 1917, America entered World War I, declaring war against Germany, three years after the war had begun. This play involves a multi-cultural cast. In addition to the central family there is Julia, Chris' sweetheart, a young black woman; Mrs. O'Neill, an Irish neighbor; Jake, a Jewish boy; Cornelia Lewis, a settlement worker and a Bill Harvey a black muleteer already enlisted. Cornelia Lewis, although void of ethnic description reveals herself to be a supporter of the war. *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918), "debuted at Howard High School in Wilmington Delaware" (Hatch and Shine 169; Allen 93) where Dunbar-Nelson was employed as a school teacher. The central characters are a black family of siblings, Dan, the oldest brother, thirty years old, is crippled and confined to an old steamer chair; Lucy, the sister is twenty years old; and Chris, the youngest brother and the key financial supporter of the family who has just had his number called up in the draft.

### **Synopsis and Preliminary Analysis**

The play is set in the kitchen of a tenement apartment in a northern manufacturing city. All of the action of the play takes place in this one room, a quality that immediately aligns this play with a black feminist theater aesthetic. How the community of characters enters and exits the room, I mark as aligning with a queer use of space. These characters also create pockets of queer time wherein memory is transmitted between characters and the audience. At the start of the play we see two characters, Lucy and Dan who are siblings. Both are described as "frail" and "face thin, pinched bearing traces of suffering" (2). "Dan is about thirty years old" and Lucy is, "slight, frail, brown-skinned, about twenty... walks with a limp" (2). Although Lucy is bustling

about the kitchen preparing dinner, their conversation is about a third person, Chris, on whom they are waiting.

DAN: Isn't it most time for him to come home, Lucy?

LUCY: It's hard to tell, Danny, dear Chris doesn't come home on time anymore.

DAN: Where does he go?

LUCY: I know where he doesn't go. Dan, but where he does, I can't say. He's not going to Julia's anymore lately. I'm afraid Dan, I'm afraid. (3).

The siblings continue to discuss suggesting, "the world outside" is changing and perhaps drawing Chris to it. The siblings have created a queer space for themselves and identify the world outside as producing fear and temptation. Lucy then reflects on a time when she was not so fearful,

"in the old days when we were back home -- in the little house with the garden, and you and father coming home nights and mother getting supper, and Chris and I studying lessons in the dining-room at the table -- we didn't have to eat in the kitchen then, and -" (4).

Dan interjects Lucy's recollections with his own memories, "...notices posted on the fence" and "niggers had no business having such a decent home". Lucy "unheeding the interruption" continues to relive her happy memory while Dan interjects again with his memories of their father, "shot down like a dog for daring to defend his home" and mother, "dead of pneumonia and heartbreak" (4) and his own tragic story, "maimed for life in a factory of hell!" (4). At this utterance Lucy "coming out of her trance" of happy memories embraces her brother and apologizes for making him relive the series of tragic events the led him to his current state both physical and emotional. Lucy has created a safe space of memory to drift into while Dan sits

firmly in the trauma of memory. In the brief retelling both Lucy and Dan become for each other listener and storyteller ending with a brief moment of embrace between them at the end of the telling. For the audience the body and voice have reunited in the trauma and become reflective of both their memoried experiences.

Chris enters and sits at the table ready for dinner but clearly burdened, “his shoulders hunched up” (4). Lucy briefly inquires, then after not receiving an answer “busies herself bringing dishes to the table” continuing to prepare dinner. Lucy states that Chris is late in returning home today to which Chris answers, “I have bad news. My number was posted today”(4). Chris has been drafted. Lucy is shocked and drops a plate shattering to the floor. “Dan leans forward tensely, his hands gripping the arms of his chair” (5). Lucy voices a complaint that “they won’t take you from us! And shoot you down, too?” (5). When asked what will he do,

Chris “*rises and strikes the table heavily with his hand*). I’m not going.

DAN: Your duty –

CHRIS: --Is here with you. I owe none elsewhere. I’ll pay none.

LUCY: Chris! Treason! I’m afraid!” (5).

Chris tells Lucy that he understands why she is afraid and recalls how the fear came upon her after having lost their father to a murderous lynch mob, an injustice that also went “unpunished”, for being “driven like dogs from our [their] home”, all events which led to Dan being unable to work. Dan has become disabled from an accident in a northern factory where, after fleeing the south, he took a job to support the family. Chris also blames these events for him only having “a fragment of an education and no chance – only half a man” (6). Chris announces that he plans to claim exemption because he is the only remaining sibling who can earn a living to support his sister and disabled brother. Dan verbally attacks calling him a “slacker” to which Chris responds,

CHRIS: You call me that? You, whom I'd lay down my life for? I'm no slacker when I hear the real call of duty. Shall I desert the cause that needs me – you – Sister – home? For a fancied glory? Am I to take up the cause of a lot of kings and politicians who play with men's souls, as if they are cared – dealing them out..." (6).

In the middle of Chris's speech Jake, "a Jewish boy" enters and applauds the end of Chris' speech comparing his comments to those heard in the secret socialist meetings held about town. Jake also offers his own solution of applying for exemption. Next Mrs. O'Neill, the Irish neighbor, enters the tenement room with news of a sale of potatoes at the store. Mrs. O'Neill offers to act as a sort of bodyguard to keep "the crowd off yer game foot"(8) so that Lucy can buy the food she and the family need. After hearing that Chris has to go to war, Mrs. O'Neill offers her own story of her husband going off to war and leaving her with "five kiddies" (8) before Chris interrupts with, "he went to fight for his own. What do they do for my people? They don't want us, except in extremity" (8). Jake chimes in "like Jews in Russia" (8) and continues to compare the Black American story with that of the Jews.

JAKE: ...Like Jews in Russia, eh? Denied the right of honor in men, eh? Or the right of virtue in women, eh? There isn't a wrong you can name that your race has endured that mine has not suffered, too. But there's a future, Chris – a big one. We younger ones must be in that future – ready for it, ready for it- *His voice trails off, and he sinks despondently into a chair*" (8).

Chris replies with questions of, "Future? Where? Not in this country? Where?" (8). Julia, Chris' sweetheart, now enters the tenement with the news of his enlistment, which she heard in the streets on her way to his apartment. It is important to note that Julia is the third non-family

member to enter the apartment without knocking. The freedom with which these characters enter the sacred space of the tenement suggests some sort of shared community. In heteronormative behavior one knocks at the door to seek entry to another's home. The absence of this knocking and the absence of those who live there to even request such a formality mark this space as nonnormative space or as queer. In this queer space, the following conversation on race, war and patriotism can happen amongst ethnically different, immigrant people. In this setting all the queer characters of the play converse on the queer topic of their own queer bodies in foreign lands --their adopted home-- and sacrifice their queer bodies for a foreign country in which they have yet to secure full equality. Dunbar-Nelson has created queer subjects, discussing queer content, in a queer space in 1919.

Chris proclaims that he is not going to war and Dan and Mrs. O'Neill object to his decision. Dan begins to list the wars in which Black men, "our men" have fought in years past, "They went in 1776" (9). Chris responds, "Yes, as slaves. Promised freedom they never got" (9).

DAN: No, gladly, and saved the day, too, many a time. Ours was the first blood shed on the altar of National liberty. we went in 1812, on land and sea. Our men were through the struggles of 1861 –

CHRIS: When the Nation was afraid not to call them. Didn't want 'em at first.

DAN: Never mind; they helped work out their own salvation. And they were there in 1898 –

CHRIS: Only to have their valor disputed.

DAN: --And they were at Carrizal, my boy, and now—(9).

To put this list of battles into context, 1776 is the Revolutionary War; 1812 is the war between the United State and Great Britain and Ireland; 1861 is the American Civil war; 1898 is the

Spanish American war; and the war at Carrizal happened in 1916 with the United States led by General Trumbull versus Mexico led by Felix U. Gomez. Dunbar-Nelson does well to diagram the history and arguments, both for and against, Black Americans fighting and dying in American wars.

At this point a new character enters, again, without knocking. Bill Harvey, a muleteer in the war, is greeted by Dan, “And so you weren’t torpedoed?” (10). Bill is on a short return to gather more mules for the war and he describes his experience so far,

BILL: “Mules, rough-necks, wires, mud, dead bodies, stench, terror!...they crucified little children” (10).

To which Chris responds,

CHRIS: “Well, what’s that to us? They’re little white children. But here, our fellow-countrymen throw our little black babies in the flames...”(10).

Neither Jake nor Mrs. O’Neill appears offended to this by Chris’, disregard of dying little white children. Instead Jake asks, Chris, “don’t you get tired sitting around grieving because you’re colored?” (11). From here the argument twists. Dan claims pride for he and Chris to be “numbered with the darker ones” (11) and excuses Chris’ arguments, as “youthful wrath” (11). Jake, Mrs. O’Neill and Dan try to convince Chris to change his mind by attacking his pride in his race and in the future of his race and his commitment to the future success of his race. In this argument, ethnicities of Jewish and Irish are grouped with Black as comrades in the same struggle to survive oppression from whites. Julia interrupts the ethnic guilt pile-on by questioning Dan directly.

JULIA: But why, Dan, it isn’t our quarrel? What have we to do with their affairs? These white people, they hate us. Only today I was sneered at when I went to help

with some of their relief work. Why should you, my Chris, go to help those who hate you? (11).

Chris embraces Julia for her remarks and commitment to him. Bill Harvey begins again hinting at the horrors he has seen, "...the babies and girls – old women –if you could have—*covers his eyes with his hand*" (12). Chris again responds with disconcert for the babies and children but Dan replies by suggesting that if those mothers knew of how brown babies were being burned they would have felt sorrow too. In this moment he binds the oppression of Europeans during World War 1 with the oppression of blacks in America at the turn of the century. Dan's argument has some effect on the couple because simultaneously Julia and Chris break their embrace and Chris turns and looks out a window. The final character Cornelia Lewis, settlement worker enters without knocking, in the silence. She has come to share in the discussion. Cornelia agrees that Lucy and Dan need Chris at home that prompts Lucy to admit they do need Chris at home but "your county needs you more" (13). In this moment Dan and Lucy impress upon Chris that they should not be his priority. They together proffer that country and race trump family and individuality. Julia has now been swayed and implores Chris to consider,

JULIA: "...but Chris – it IS our country – our race—"(14).

The exterior world that Lucy is afraid of "in the street" at the start of the play is now heard through the window as described in the stage directions. "*The music comes faintly, gradually growing louder and louder until it reaches a crescendo. The tune is "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." played in a stirring march time*" (14). The company begins to sing along softly as they move to the window as the music of the band comes closer leaving Chris alone in his thoughts at the "*center of the floor, rigidly at attention, a rapt look on his face. Dan strains at his*



*chair, as if he would rise, then sinks back, his hand feebly beating time to the music, which swells to a martial crash)” (14).*

End of Play.

### **Black Feminist Core Theme Analysis: Black Women’s Activism**

This play sits as an anomaly within my research. There is a clear pro-war propagandistic message within the play which supports a third prominent theme of Black Feminist Thought; Black Woman as Activist. However, with a closer reading of the text, there are many activist topics Dunbar-Nelson adds to the overall conversation such as the history of black people fighting in American wars, denial of the pursuit of happiness for black people by white people, and an ethnically and racially mixed class of persons expressing nation pride through sacrifice. It is these extra conversations that draw into question the validity of Dunbar-Nelson’s enlistment activism and pro war support efforts in the black community. I do not mean to contradict her passion because her legacy of papers, books and speeches about the topic exist as evidence of her commitment (Hull 33–104). However, I do question whether this should be classified solely as a propaganda play in support of black men welcoming the draft as an opportunity to show national pride. My analysis reveals that at the forefront this play echoes the diverse conversations around sacrifice, war, nation pride, race and ethnic pride that were present early in twentieth century. To understand and welcome the play in its totality we must give attention to all the themes woven throughout and complicate that it is simply a propaganda play.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson was a staunch supporter of joining the war effort and encouraged a Black presence in World War One. By writing *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, as a propaganda play Dunbar-Nelson encouraged Black men’s participation in the war. As a member of the Woman’s

Committee of the Council of National Defense Dunbar-Nelson also supported black women's activism in support of the war effort (Hull 72).

As a black female director of theater and social activist, this play sits in opposition to my personal beliefs. I am extremely conflicted on the issue. My father and grandfather served in the armed forces and as a youth I seriously considered enlisting. In high school the United States Marines Corp aggressively recruited me as a scholar-athlete. I could have had a career in the military. As I grew older my father shared his experiences of discrimination while enlisted right alongside stories of how the service improved his life. However was that life improvement, through enlisting, truly an improvement or was trying to simply live as a black man in America so thwarted with inequality and absence of opportunity that joining the military was the best alternative? I have not reconciled this argument within me and I believe the push to support the war and building arguments in support of the war shook loose Dunbar-Nelson's initial resolve, creating a bifurcation that later leads her to pacifism.

I am in disturbing awe of the power of Dunbar-Nelson's words and the environment in which she placed them and in whose character mouths she placed them. More than a play about race, *Mine Eyes Have Seen* is a play deeply about class similar to Burrill's *Mine Eyes Have Seen*. The setting is a tenement apartment in the north, the habitation for several varying races living in close proximity to one another. I assume this because, as mentioned prior, no one knocks when they enter the scene/apartment, they enter as if invited and even expected. Mrs. O'Neill suggests she and Lucy go to the market for the groceries where Mrs. O'Neill will hold back the throngs of women so Lucy with her club foot can have a good selection of the potatoes before they are all gone.

An Irish woman, a Jewish boy, three black men -- one disabled; two black women -- one disabled make up the queer cast of characters. Queer because at the turn of the century these ethnicities sat marginalized -- outside of the dominant class and culture of white. All come together to encourage Chris, a young, black male to answer the call and enlist after his number has been drawn in the draft for World War One. Chris, the young black man argues that he should not join the war effort because his duty is more to his family rather than to a country that systematically denies equal rights to black people. While the pro war argument is easiest to identify, the secondary argument of sacrificing for a bigger, better future and how to sacrifice becomes apparent with a close reading of the experiences of family and neighbors surrounding Chris. The neighbors' stories separately portend reasons to join the war effort and possibly sacrifice one's life. While as a whole the stories raise concern, a question of when will American black people and immigrants have sacrificed enough to earn their American citizenship.

*Sacrifice for Nation Pride?*

In this play Irish, Jewish and black characters express what they have sacrificed for their country in war and what they are willing to sacrifice. Mrs. O'Neill's husband was part of the fighting in Ireland and was cruelly maimed before they killed him. Jake, a boy, "slight, pale...Hebraic, thin-lipped, eager-eyed," (4) draws a comparison between the oppression of Jews and the oppression of Blacks in America, "There isn't a wrong you can name that your race has endured that mine has not suffered, too" (4). Jake is eager to be drafted and to become a soldier to fight for his country, for America but he is infirm. His soldier pride seems to be derived from his perceived idea of glory in battle. Bill Harvey, a black man, "...big, muscular, rough, his voice thunderous," (5) is a muleteer, bringing mules to the front lines, returned on a short leave talks of the atrocities he has seen. However, Bill Harvey, an idea of the quintessential black man, is

hurrying back to perform his duty to his country and represent his race despite the atrocities, which in his retelling seem to place him in a state of post-traumatic stress. Dunbar-Nelson writes Harvey's lines about the war as lists with commas and dashes as if he is unable to fully describe the horror. Combined these stories discourage an appetite for war. Add to these the history of the black race honorably fighting tyranny professed by "Dan, the cripple" (1), brother to Chris, and *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, could be read as a pro peace play. Reading with a pacifist lens, Dunbar-Nelson has created a play revealing her future stance as a pacifist, which she becomes during World War Two. Based on the vivacity of her pro-war work I do not believe she intended to write a pacifist play.

Following this lens Dunbar-Nelson reveals the absurdity of black Americans' existing as "other" to white Americans. She reveals the blood sacrifice in many wars given by black Americans and the pursuit and attainment of the American Dream by black Americans. What more does a black American need to do to be American? The end of the play suggests an answer of more blood sacrifice by the nearing sound of the marching band playing a battle hymn. However this is juxtaposed with Chris' resistant stand center stage as the rest of the cast is swept up in the singing. Chris' resistance can be acted in many ways to show guilt or to foreshadow his enlistment to joining the war. However my Black feminist aesthetic demands that the character of Chris remain the balancing weight of reason in the room and in the play. The character of Chris must stand in limbo, laying the decision in the lap of the audience for their discussion. As everyone is swept up in the emotion of the moment with the music, Chris stands as the rooted evidence of the sacrifices in black Americans' history for a country that continues to deny them equality. Chris is the embodiment of memory in that moment.

There is also a commentary on social class within *Mine Eyes Have Seen*. The upper class is absent in the tenement of the “northern part of the United States” (1). Through the siblings we surmise the black family was once a member of the upper class, albeit the segregated black upper class. However, “. . . notices posted on the fence for us to leave town because niggers had no business have such a decent home” (2) lead to the burning of their home, their father being “Shot down like a dog for daring to defend his home” (2) and the eventual death from “pneumonia and heartbreak in the bleak [northern] climate” (2) of their mother. The upper class, as animated by Chris, is holding all the cards in a poker game, each card representing an ethnicity and being wagered to a location of battle,

CHRIS: “gather them up, throw them in the discard, and call for a new deal of a million human, suffering souls? And I must be the Deuce of Spades?” (4).

The absence of a physical representation of the upper class results in a commentary on their presence as America marches into World War One. What role did the white upper class take in the war?

In *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, the people leaving their families, sacrificing, fighting and dying in this war are the lower class, regardless of race. The family of siblings, Lucy, Dan and Chris, recall how they were once a well-off family. Their father had his own business and the family owned and occupied a very nice single-family home, which was burnt down by Ku Klux Klan members presumably out of jealousy, leaving behind women and children survivors (Perkins and Stephens 4; Mitchell, “(Anti-)Lynching Plays” 216; Goldsby 3). The pro war theme then sits as a secondary option for securing legitimized American citizenship. An option that has yet to prove its validity as we learn in Dan’s recounting of history,

“They went in 1776...Ours was the first blood shed on the altar of national liberty. We went in 1812, on land and sea. Our men were through the struggles of 1861...—And they were at Carrizal, my boy, and now...” (5).

If American citizenship is not legitimized by a black family owning their home and educating their children and running a successful business, and it is also not legitimized by fighting in historical wars then what is the *how* does one become legitimate American citizens?

Dunbar-Nelson introduces the idea of living and dying for the future through Jake, the Jewish boy, “...a future, Chris -- a big one. We younger ones must be in *that* [my italics] future” (4). A recounting of the play yields a weakened argument to fight today for the future. Now, American citizenship once attainable through pursuit of happiness is revamped to attainable through committing ones life to fighting for Nation pride, has ultimately been pushed off yet again to the undefined the future and to future generations.

### **Live Readings with Community of Black Women**

The reading was held at the home of one member of the Collective, the black queer women’s coterie in Baltimore. This would be the second reading held with this particular group of women. The gathering that evening totaled seven, including myself. Five were members of the Collective and a sixth, a white woman, was the partner of one of the members and the evening’s host, we were meeting in their apartment. We arrived close to 7pm with platters of food, beer, wine and champagne for a special toast. For this session I made macaroni and cheese. There was also pizza, salad and broccoli. For the first hour we greeted one another while breaking into smaller group conversations about our various research interests, work agendas, and daily experiences of living before settling down to eat. As a blessing to accompany the champagne

toast we each offered an accomplishment. One woman had scheduled her dissertation defense, another had solidified a relationship, another was fielding guest speaker offers and another finishing a semester of teaching. When we had all spoken an accomplishment we raised our glasses of champagne toasted, sipped and passed our plates around to be spooned up and delivered to the plate by whoever was closest to the serving spoon.

After we feasted we threw blankets and pillows on the living room floor. I distributed the scripts and distributed roles. I read the stage directions and took up the role of Jake, which was left uncast due to the amount of roles exceeding the number of women to read. The reading began slowly but found its rhythm as we continued. Unlike the reading of *They That Sit in Darkness* the women were fairly quiet throughout. There were no vocal utterances in approval or disapproval of the content or characters. At the end of the reading, the group collectively breathed a moment and then launched into their analysis. The post-reading discussion gravitated around the following list of themes:

- Then (the era the play was written) versus Now (the era in which we currently live);
- National involvement versus Global involvement;
- Historical knowledge of war involvement;
- A shared social class as the facilitator to conversations on race and equality

*Then versus Now.* The group immediately made comparisons between events of the early 1900's to the current era. They questioned what had changed if anything, with black Americans striving to be accepted as Americans. Members drew correlations between the Civil Rights movement where Jews and blacks bonded together and the comments from Jake of, "There isn't a wrong you can name that your race has endured that mine has not..." (4), which attempts to

align the Black American with the Jewish American as both oppressed people but still willing and eager, as Jake is, to fight for their current country.

*National Involvement versus Global Involvement.* Should liberation of another country's oppressed people be more important than the liberation of oppressed people in your own country? Why is more merit placed on fighting for your country on foreign soil rather than fighting for the people of your own country in your homeland? These are questions that yield no definitive answer but are questions that need asking.

*Historical knowledge of war involvement.* The amount of historical knowledge Dan has about when black Americans fought in war is substantial. One woman even remarked that she would need to research all the dates Dan listed. The women called attention to this while noting that this type of knowledge of a race's historical involvement in past wars is unheard of today.

*Shared social class as a facilitator to conversations on race and equality.* Both a "then and now" comparison and dealing with a shared social class was the discussion of the ethnicities of the characters in the play and their shared location. One member brought to the fore of the discussion that there were multiple ethnicities living in close proximity to one another discussing racial allegiance to America, not their country of origin but the country in which they now lived. This member also discussed how it is uncommon in today's world to have black, Irish and Jewish living in the same tenement and so closely that they do not need to knock to gain access to each other's homes. She correlates the proximity of these races to a shared social class during the early twentieth century and that a similar proximity no longer exists because of the evolution of the "melting pot" wherein Jews and Irish were allowed to meld and become a part of the "white" class. This melding which Jews and Irish people to advance their social class, by



concealing their ethnicity, creating a gap between blacks and those formerly identified as Irish or Jewish.

Again a nine-page play generated nearly two hours of conversation amongst the group. The conversation was enlightening and again stoked my directorial belief that these plays remain important today and would draw conversations around important content like war, patriotism, social class and race and equality.

### **Autoethnographic Account**

*Mine Eyes Have Seen* by Alice Dunbar-Nelson is my least favorite of the three plays at the center of this study. When I first read the script I found it to be a melodramatic and an emotionally manipulative attempt at American patriotism. I thought the characters were thin, lacking emotional depth and I thought the playwright was writing with a sort of blind desperation in support of the Black men joining the war effort. I thought it would be the easiest to write about/write off. I was not challenged to envision a directed performance of the play and so I dismissed it. However I needed a third play and *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, fit the time period and the distribution requirements and the playwright was also a part of the writing group so it was included.

Before the reading described above, I gathered my family -- grandmother, mother, step-father, aunts uncles, cousins and older church friends -- and did a reading of the play with them. I assumed they would come to the same conclusions I did; a melodramatic and preposterous propaganda play to encourage black men to go to war. I was wrong. For my family, the post-reading discussion became a session on family history. The events which orphaned the siblings and forced them out of their home and into the industrial north reminded my grandmother of her

youth growing up in the South in a black town. She told a story of closing the doors and shutters and sitting very still, huddled together as a family whenever white people came through their neighborhood. White and black did not mix on a social level and if whites were in their neighborhood it meant danger to blacks. My mother thought the playwright was reflecting the opinions of the time. My step-father told of growing up in Mississippi and experiencing the signs of segregation, “Whites Only” and “Colored”. In this post-reading discussion stories of trauma within my family were told and in their telling trauma was voiced and embodied.

I was reminded of the long car trips we would take to the South to visit family when I was young. We always packed fried chicken and lots of fruit and drinks, canned soda or a container of juice with cups and plates and napkins. As we drove we snacked in the car, stopping only for bathroom breaks which were often on the side of the road, or to switch drivers. I learned that night that we weren't trying to lessen our time on the road. We packed food because in the South there were places that a black family was not welcome to stop and eat and rather than submit my brothers and cousins and I to racism, we drove on with a picnic feast in the back seat.

It was that night my opinion of *Mine Eyes Have Seen* and its purpose as a play evolved. I know Dunbar-Nelson was a supporter of the war effort and of women, particularly black women, as activists for World War One, which strengthens her inspiration to write the play, as a piece of propaganda. However reading this play today, even as we continue to cycle through years of war, stirs more than the topics that Dunbar-Nelson wrote about on the surface. Reading the play today is about memory, and about recall. It is a spark that calls me to my past, to those incidents of being black in America that my ancestors experienced. Just as a member of the Collective reading noted how little she knew about blacks in American histories of war, I know little about my familial history. The play is as an impetus to lift the veil of our/my American history and see

it for all it encompasses, the wonderful and the terrifying. There are people born in this millennium who have never known the United States in a time of peace. All of our wars are in foreign lands to free people from their oppressors yet we have oppressions here in the United States. How then should a soldier fight poverty, discrimination, inequality which are oppressive forces, some sanctioned by American law? Through the lens of Dunbar-Nelson's play patriotism might sit in opposition to defending your own country's people.

*Mine Eyes Have Seen* complicates the American narrative and the characters who speak about it in this tenement dwelling. The character Dan, who lists the historical battles blacks have fought in and the pride that it brought them, fails to connect that their sacrifice went without reward. In juxtaposition, the Irish and the Jewish were swept up in the melting pot and crowned "white" and afforded all the power and privilege that accompanied the title "white". The young women Julia and Lucy do not forward the plot but are interesting representations of women sitting in opposition to their playwright creator. Both are scared, broken and clinging to a man, which is a complete opposite to Alice Dunbar-Nelson who was quick witted, and head-strong and not dependent on a man (Hull 69). All of the characters offer much for an actor and a director to wrestle with in rehearsals. They are complicated characters given the appearance of simplicity. What a gift for me to explore as a director!

## **Conclusion**

*Mine Eyes Have Seen* initially my least favorite of the three plays has proven to be more than simple pro war participation propaganda play. After a close reading Dunbar-Nelson complicates the blind ideology of American patriotism in times of war. She creates an argument that is connected to intellectual thought as well as the emotions while. She has also created a

queer community revolving around a black family home living in several dimensions of queer space. The queer space of memory for the characters of Lucy and Dan are vastly different and provide each character with a different source of security. Lucy retreats into the best parts of her memory as a way of coping while Dan lingers in the violence using it as fuel for his righteous anger. Both queer spaces of memory that can allow both characters and audience members to become listener and storyteller. This type of aesthetic I mark as queer and black feminist and specific to the performance of theater. The memories drawn from a shared experience serve different purposes for the characters and create a queer space of memory for both characters and audience to inhabit, experience emotionally and intellectually critique simultaneously. It is also a double gendered reimagining of history.

*Mine Eyes Have Seen* having a queer black feminist theatre aesthetic uncovers a category of black theatre on the margins of black theatre theory championed by Locke or Du Bois in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As in defining queer black feminist theatre aesthetic one must not only look to the text but also to how the play reached its audience, in this case the black community, and the nature of its reception, readings in private spaces.

**Chapter 7**

**Conclusion**

My study has expanded the Black theatre and American theatre literary tradition to include the works of Mary Powell Burrill, Angelina Weld Grimké and Alice Dunbar Nelson as contributors and early twentieth century innovators of a queer black feminist theatre aesthetic. Their plays queered ideas of black identity in the time period and continue to queer contemporary audiences learned history of black life in the early twentieth century. In a Marxian sense these women have created texts that are cultural containers of a history that is seldom told.

In the early 1900's black women versed in poetry who were educated as teachers and practicing their profession as educators came together in the form of a writing group. Perhaps it was in these gatherings where these women found agency to write their stories, first creatively in poetry and short stories and then transitioning to theatre plays. Perhaps it was this same idea of agency that then led them to release their work in a format, which would reach the community. Whether all members were present at each session is unlikely however there is evidence of the groups existence (Hull 165; Hutchinson 683; Allen 110). Scholars point to a romantic relationship between Burrill and Grimké as schoolgirls; they both were employed as teachers at M Street school however I have found no evidence that their working relationship was anything other than professional. Dunbar-Nelson's romantic woman-to-woman relationships are revealed through her letters and writing about and to women. In this evolving time of the New Negro movement these women engaged fluidly in a homosocial lifestyle (Smith-Rosenberg 9). Today I have applied the term "queer" to their behavior as a binding link between the past and the present but with the added present layer of queer as a political statement. It is relevant and substantial that these queer women of color wrote plays in the early 1900's with strong Black feminist themes and queer theatre aesthetics later outlined by scholars of Black Feminist Thought and queer theorists. The content these early 1900's black female playwrights crafted exists as

political commentary on the state of blackness/black identity/black bodies in America nearly a century later. By shining a scholarly light on these plays I am, in a sense, clearing the overgrowth of weeds and vines from the foundation stone of Black theater, of American theater and in particular the foundations of contemporary queer, black women playwrights. This research also shines light on the potential of live readings of these and other plays by black women from the early twentieth century as a powerful source for intergenerational and cross-generational knowledge creation.

In researching each woman's past, it is clear these women chose not to conform to heteronormative ideas of marriage and sexual intimacy existing only between one male and one female. Their personal lives intersected with their professional lives; in the case of Alice Dunbar-Nelson and several female romantic partners; and Mary Powell Burrill and her longtime partner Lucy Diggs Slowe and Angelina Weld Grimké's romantic relationship with Mary Powell Burrill (Hull 139) sheds a scholarly light on their works as a sites of intersection of the personal and the political. The works they created for the stage, the topics they chose to highlight and the many themes that were highlighted by the groups of women during the live readings serve as evidence of the intersections.

Burrill, Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson created "nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" within their play texts (Halberstam 6). This type of creation firmly seats their work as queer. I mark the space within the plays as queer sites in which people of color redefine what a family unit looks like and how it operates. The setting of Burrill's play served multiple uses – living space, place of paid labor and place of birth and death. Grimké's queers the characters of Rachel, Mrs. Loving, Tom, Jimmy and John Strong. Each of these characters is in opposition – queer opposition-- to the dominant

white constructions of blackness from the time period, thus creating self-defined black identities. Dunbar-Nelson used a door-less tenement apartment and a cast of immigrants to queer the idea of community cutting across racial lines. For contemporary audiences Burrill, Grimké, and Dunbar-Nelson queer the existence of black existence at the turn of the century.

Black feminism was born out of a desire for African American/black women to address issues of their lived experiences and explore/develop a collective voice that existed outside the confines of the dominant group (Johnson and Henderson 4). Crossing into the twentieth century these playwrights were beginning to self-define black female identities on the theatrical stage for the same reasons. The characters and stories they created were early models of Black Feminist Thought. Burrill addressed black women's labor, paid and unpaid, through the lead characters of Mrs. Jasper and her daughter Lindy. While foregrounding an argument supporting reproductive rights for rural black women, she also linked reproductive rights to the repetitive potentially crippling cycle of labor across a generation of black women. Grimké used her lead female character, Rachel, to draft a theatrical example of a young black woman on a journey to her own self-discovery. The character of Rachel, through pages of monologues, questions the preordained roles of young black women to, without question, birth black children. Instead she questions birthing black children into a dominant culture that denies them their existence. Rachel, a young woman who dreamt only of motherhood, chooses a new and different path for herself. Rachel's choice is an early example of a core tenet of black feminism thought – self-defining through finding one's voice. In *Rachel*, the majority of the text is Rachel's so we are hearing her solid thought process, which brings her to her ultimate decision but it is in the process that we see this young black woman's self-defining voice developing. Alice Dunbar Nelson whether on purpose or not, wrote a play which complicated the role of black women's activism. An analysis of the



text reveals duality in the effort of black men enlisting in World War One. The overt message of the play can be read as in support of enlistment as an act of patriotism however the historical accounts Dunbar-Nelson layered into the text suggests enlistment as a futile avenue for black people's equality in America. She closes the play by laying the question before the audience as the young black man who has recently been drafted stands center stage unmoving as a marching band playing "Battle Hymn of the Republic" passes beneath the window of the tenement.

These three playwrights are linked in that they each offer core tenets of Black feminist thought and in that they spaces and how the characters use the space is queer. They are joined in that all three plays were published in periodicals, which perhaps unknowingly created a new audience for their work. This perhaps inadvertently created a queered style of theater production – the embodied practice of queer black feminist ideas through live play readings among community members. An embodied practice formed out of necessity in the early twentieth century with contemporary replication to reintroduce these plays in the twenty-first century.

### **An Old Directive for a New Black Theater**

Koritha Mitchell in, "Black-Authored Lynching Drama's Challenge to Theater History", a chapter of Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez's "Black Performance Theory"; states, "...theater and lynching were not discrete entities that sometimes cooperated; they were interdependent" (DeFrantz and Gonzalez 92). The theatrical stage as a cultural institution has been a source of unsubstantiated truth making. White constructions of blackness formed onstage became stereotypes, traveled across the country and internationally and accepted as truth by audiences. Koritha Mitchell takes the next step to align lynchcraft with stagecraft,

“In 1911, Will Porter was tied to an opera house stage, where “his body [was] riddled with one hundred bullets by mob members who purchased tickets to participate” (Zagrand, 26)” (DeFrantz and Gonzalez 89).

The act of devaluing black identity onstage, had pinnacled. It was an act of complete erasure with theatrical flare. Today, Black theater fights for a place on the American stage; why should it? Why should Black theater fight for the site of its own lynching? Could it instead fortify itself by returning to private, safe and communal spaces? Could it in fact thrive where theater can be practiced and debated and developed by and with the people it is for. In a July 4, 2014 article *The New York Times* reported that New Brooklyn Theater Company has begun to engage the work of turn of the twentieth century black playwrights. They engage the work through minimally staged readings at a bed and breakfast however, these readings are specifically aimed at cultivating an audience for a future production of the play (Morgan). The private space reading is merely used as a means to develop audience.

Theatre Communications Group has a program called “Audience (R)Evolution” (“Theatre Communications Group Audience Revolution”). Theater attendance has been declining over the last decade and the Audience (R)Evolution program is designed to figure out how to engage new audiences through a invited theater convening, partnering with a planning and research company and then releasing a report accessible to those invited theater companies. As a freelance director unbound to a theater company, the idea is an empty gesture. Theater attendance declined because the white audiences theaters catered to with white theater are growing old and dying. In their absence, theaters are turning to “diversity” as a stopgap. Theaters offer playwrights of color opportunities to have their work produced, in exchange, theaters apply for diversity grants from foundations helping to cover their lost ticket revenue. The work by

playwrights of color attracts audiences of color but the work goes no further into the community. In some cases the playwright of color is so taxed to write the next play for the theater that they are pushing out work that has not had time to be developed causing playwright burn out. As a black, queer woman, director committed to the development of new play plays by women of color, I position my research as an alternative structure to return theater plays to the community and to the playwright, theater company not included.

Here we have a moment, an opportunity to shift the focus of theater from audience development/appeasement back to the initial intent of Black theater, to create for the community. Creating for the community must also take into account how you present to the community. Private spaces, living rooms, places of comfort become key to reaching the community audience. Home Theater Festival International is a movement that is returning art to the community by making art accessible and purposeful again. Home Theater Festival International is a “festival intended to circumvent arts institutions...put[ting] control completely in the hands of the performing artist...” (“Curating for Radical Generosity”). The Chicago Home Theater Festival (CHTF) takes up this international model and adds a layer of communal cross-pollination. Their goal is to get people from different neighborhoods to go see a piece of art, theater, reading, film etc. in a different area of the city. I deepen their intentions by adding the importance of art happenings in homes of neighbors to allow communal discussion of issues raised in black theater plays and embodied practice of these new self-defined representations of black people. This type of work is important and relevant to the academy and to the professional theater world precisely because it places communal engagement as its priority. With the surge of black playwrights being produced – black female playwrights in particular- there is a need for renewal in how Black theater is developed, for whom it is developed and how it is produced.

### **Black Female Playwrights as Early Black Feminists**

"Identity is not the goal but rather the point of departure in the process of self – definition" (Collins 125). This statement by Black Feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins deepens the significance of the characters and stories created by the earliest black female playwrights that reflected rarely shown pieces of Black American life on the American theatrical stage. At the time of these playwrights, the United States held stage constructions of blackness that were crafted by white people to reflect what white people understood of black existence (Ghartey-Kootin 102–122). The playwrights of my study have drafted constructions of black men, women, children and community for the American theatrical stage that offer an expanded interpretation and re-presentation of black existence. In doing so these three black female playwrights have been cultural workers, containing within their scripts the beliefs both social and political of a Black American community. Black female playwrights can be credited with beginning to self-define identities within black culture since the earliest years of non-musical black dramatic theater.

Scholar, Gloria Hull in her book, *Color, Sex and Poetry* (1987), cites Ralph Graves, a *Washington Post* reviewer in the early twentieth century, as suggesting, “*Rachel* be published so that it would have a wide field of missionary usefulness”(Hull 120). In 1915 *Crisis* magazine subscriptions totaled 35,000 and increased to 37,625 the following year. With the growing popularity of *Crisis*, these plays were being read by tens of thousands of black Americans who were the main subscribers to *Crisis*, “the official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (“Timeline | The Crisis Magazine | A Record of the Darker Races”). Imagine having your play read by 37,000 people without counting how many

other people were exposed through its sharing in homes, churches and other private meeting spaces that were safe and, in some respects, became sacred.

In the early twentieth century the gathering spaces of black folk were limited. Less than fifty years before 1915, there were laws -- mostly concentrated in the South -- called Black Codes to deter the gathering of black people (“Video: The Origins of Black Codes | Black Codes and Pig Laws | Theme Gallery | Slavery by Another Name | PBS”). Black Codes imposed on blacks in the South easily traveled to the North as southern blacks migrated north during Reconstruction in search of a better life. Gathering became an important avenue for sharing information among the black community, information that included racially driven social injustices, tallies of lynching, the locations and the names of the victims and those remaining family members. Black folks gathered in private and personal spaces for discussing public, social and political issues. The personal is political and has always been for black folk in the United States of America. NAACP’s magazine *the Crisis*, was a repository for events of black life, delivered to homes containing within it meeting times, locations and critique of the triumphs and atrocities of civil rights in the United States and the Caribbean. I consider archival issues of *the Crisis* magazine to be monthly collections of Black American History.

Plays published in periodicals and read in defined private spaces created a queer time and space wherein African Americans engaged conversation about a racist, post-slavery, gendered, social and economic existence in America through the trials of the characters. The lynching notices in other sections of the magazine were reflected in the play *Rachel* and *Mine Eyes Have Seen*. The split consciousness of wartime patriotism to a country that publicly condones murder of your people also calls for deeper analysis in the play, *Mine Eyes Have Seen*. Withholding information about birth control has consequences revealed through *They That Sit in Darkness*

published in Margaret Sanger's *Birth Control Review*, which is also controversial, doubling the play's subversiveness. Through examining these plays, I also wish to inscribe these early black American, queer female playwrights into the selectively engineered history of American theater.

Gathering communities of black women for live play readings and post-reading discussions are reminiscent of how these plays and their content reached the community. By lending our voices to the characters we reclaimed pieces of our racially divided American histories too often forgotten and yet too often relived. There were bridges found between the women characters of the plays and the women present in the live readings. It was an opportunity to hear a story that is actually our own. I recall the words of the young woman who read the role of Rachel in Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel*, "She is me, she sounds like me in what she is and how she interacts with her mother..." (*Rachel Post-Reading Discussion*). My own autoethnographic interactions with the text and the readings offer a platform for others to experience the plays through my black, queer, directorial lens. I add this section as an example of approaching these works and applying them beyond thinking of them as a production. How I, as a black, queer woman began learning from my queer black women ancestors and applying that learning to life – a cross-generational exchange of knowledge.

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