Overturning "Topsy's" Legacy: Black Theatre for Youth

and the Black Arts Movement

By

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To Andrea Allen and Dr. Julie Vogt, two brilliant women gone far too soon.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores Theatre for Youth practices and the influence of the Black Aesthetic on the socio-political and cultural construction of Black children during the Black Arts Movement (BAM). It reveals an historical racial disconnect between white and Black Theatre for Youth in content, language and theatrical style. Five theatre companies, which produced works with and for Black children in New York City and Newark, NJ during the time period (1965-1982), serve as research case studies. These companies include the Harlem Children's Theatre Company, Billie Holiday Theater's Theater for Little Folk, AMAS Musical Theatre's Eubie Blake Children's Theatre, Spirit House Movers and Players, and the National Black Theatre. Although scholars have documented white Theatre for Youth of this era, and theatre aimed at adults during BAM, none have yet examined the theatrical arts for, and by, Black children written and produced during the era. The historical and political significance of the depictions of Black children during BAM to Black intellectuals, writers, and cultural workers make this study an essential addition to both the fields of Theatre for Youth and Black Theatre History. Theatre historiography, multi/interdisciplinarity, and childhood studies influence my approach in which data were gathered from sources including personal interviews, archives, and digitized historical newspapers. The study indicates that the inseparability of politics from art aligns Black Theatre for Youth more closely with historical Black theatre practices than with those of its white counterpart.

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Introduction: Reclaiming the Black Child in Theatre

Since the creation of Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and the preceding and subsequent minstrel shows' racist appropriation of the picaninny image, Black writers, educators, theorists, and artists throughout the 20th Century have fought to reclaim the Black child's image. [1] One time period in which Black theatre artists devoted particular attention to creating positive representations of the Black child is the Harlem Renaissance. Katharine Capshaw Smith explains how in the 1920s and 1930s pageantry for Black children was an integral part of constructing the "New Negro": "By revealing to children their race's past accomplishments, and by constructing the child as intelligent and capable in the face of racist social structures, the period's pageants are infused with the new life and sense of potential commonly associated with the Black literary renaissance" (40). Smith notes that these pageants were both "pedagogic and propagandistic" and most commonly intended for Black and white audiences (41).

Another equally-important, but lesser studied time period in which the theatrical depiction of the Black child became of particular importance to Black intellectuals and writers is the Black Arts Movement (BAM), which lasted roughly from 1965-1975. Like the Harlem

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[1] "The picaninny was the dominant racial caricature of Black children for most of this country's history. ... Picaninnies had bulging eyes, unkempt hair, red lips, and wide mouths in which they stuffed huge slices of watermelon. ... They were routinely shown on postcards, posters, and other ephemera being chased or eaten. Picaninnies were portrayed as nameless, shiftless natural buffoons running from alligators and toward fried chicken" (Pilgrim "Picaninny").

Renaissance, BAM sought to create cultural products which presented Blacks as fully-realized human beings. The Black Arts Movement served as a cultural space in which Afrocentrism reigned and Eurocentrism was firmly rejected. Laretta Henderson notes that BAM "moves toward educating the African American community to its collective and differing histories; reflects the community and its culture and concerns, and addresses their social, spiritual, and physical needs" (301). The Afrocentrism of BAM located Blackness, Black people, orality, and modes of speech as central to art and in so doing rejected the Eurocentrism upon which the movement's proponents felt all art in the United States was based and judged. Differing greatly from Harlem Renaissance ideologies, the Black Aesthetic supposed that each audience member to any BAM work of art would be Black and that the individuality of the Black community at large and of the BAM artists themselves would be exchanged in favor of "the good of the Black collective" (Hood 47).

In this dissertation I examine the place and function of Theatre for Youth during the Black Arts Movement, focusing on the socio-political and cultural construction of the Black child as conceived by three Theatre for Youth companies in the New York City area and two area theatre companies which had active children's theatre programs. Broadly stated, I define Theatre for Youth (TFY) as theatre activities which involve youth up to age 18 either as acting participants (sometimes known as Theatre *by* or *with* Youth) or as theatre presentations which utilize professional, adult actors designed to be seen by a young audience (known as Theatre for Young Audiences). This investigation yielded many questions about race and childhood in the context of theatrical representation. How did the legacy of minstrel portrayals of Black children affect the theatrical depiction of the child during BAM? How did the era's shifting material

conditions and political climate contribute to onstage depictions of Black childhood? How closely did plays for children adhere to the ideology of the Black Aesthetic wherein Afrocentrism ruled and Eurocentrism was detested? And, what functions did performances by children themselves play in this highly politically charged artistic movement?

Although white Theatre for Youth occurring from 1965-1983 has been documented, the theatrical art in existence for Black children at this time has not been studied in depth. [2] My contribution to scholarly discourse on this topic focuses on a hotbed of Black Arts Movement activity in the U.S., the Eastern region including the New York City neighborhoods of Harlem and Brooklyn and Newark, NJ. Although I focus on the interplay between theories of BAM and cultural products for Black children which arose during the BAM era, I believe that this interplay lies in the midst of the confluence of ideas of Racial Uplift (W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington) and Civil Rights discourse (Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X).

The histories which have been written about Theatre for Youth in the United States are primarily the stories of theatre with, for, and by white children. [3] Theatre for Youth involving and/or aimed at Black children in the United States remains relatively unexplored. This is

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[2] I have expanded my study to include Black Theatre for Youth which took place up to eight years following the "end" of the Black Arts Movement because the Black theatre companies I study here often did not begin their youth programming until at least two years after their founding: most Black TFY activity in these companies occurred between 1975-1983.

[3] See, for example, Nellie McCaslin's *Theatre for Children in the United States: A History* (1997) and *A Historical Guide to Children's Theatre* (1987).

surprising when one considers white society's historical fascination with the Black child. Scholar Eric Schmiedl writes about how whites exotified and appropriated images of Black children and youth in the media particularly in the first half of the 21st Century: "Curly-haired, dark skinned, bug-eyed 'pickaninnies' could be seen dancing everywhere, selling everything from shoe polish to greeting cards. The principal media images Black children found were projected by a white and often unsympathetic society" (19).[4]

Encouragingly; however, in the past two decades, scholars have begun to examine works by playwrights of color intended for audiences composed of both children of color and white children. Much of this important work has focused on the contributions of Latina/o playwrights, such as Silvia Gonzales S and José Cruz Gonzalez; furthermore, Latina/o scholars including Lorenzo García, Johnny Saldaña, Christina Marín and Roxanne Schroeder-Arce have published articles about Latino/a youth audience reception. It is now time to devote equivalent critical attention to Black Theatre for Youth. One such contribution is Mary McAvoy's 2008 thesis "'Chalk Walkin', Slave Breaking, and Great God Almighty: Constructing Black American History in Theatre for Young Audiences Slave Narratives," which argues for the need to critique the over-simplified and sanitized tales of American slavery told in popular, contemporary TYA texts. Nonetheless, the field continues to be dominated by white scholars who tend to examine TFY through a lens of the dominant (white) culture. Importantly, this focus on "whiteness" is not particular to the field itself; rather, it is reflective of the ethnic composition of the scholarly community in the United States generally.

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[4] I define exotification as attachment to perceived cultural differences resulting in the objectification and "Othering" of a particular racial, ethnic, or cultural group.

Much has been written about Black Theatre in general and more specifically, Black theatre developed during the Black Arts Movement. Most seminal texts examine the sociopolitical context in which BAM theatre emerged or center on a literary analysis of the plays and the Black Aesthetic's manifestation in theatre. Mance Williams's *Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s: A Historical-Critical Analysis of the Movement* (1985) falls in the former category because it focuses on BAM playwrights, producers, companies, and performers in an attempt to answer how BAM theatre "break[s] with or continue[s] trends of Black-written and Black-produced theatre begun in America as early as 1821-1822" (8). In the latter category, Geneviève Fabre's *Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre* (1983) views BAM theatre as addressing "the problem of Afro-American identity" and, based on literary analysis, divides the plays of this time period into the categories of Militant Theatre; plays which blame whites for social ills and order action on the part of Blacks, and Theatre of Experience; plays which are less focused on changing social conditions of Blacks and instead attempt to explore Black culture (2).

Other principal texts which provide a broader scope about Black theatre and were equally important in grounding my understanding of theories of Black theatre and the other aesthetics in circulation during BAM include Samuel A. Hay's *African American Theatre: an Historical and Critical Analysis* (1993), Errol Hill's and James V. Hatch's *A History of African American Theatre* (2003), Harry J. Elam's and David Krasner's *African American Performance and Theater History: a Critical Reader* (2001) and Mike Sell's *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* (2005). In their otherwise thorough and nearly exhaustive tome, Hill and Hatch

mention theatre for children and youth only in passing.[5] Hatch's chapter covering the time period of the Black Arts Movement states: "For many years, the best playwrights, Black and white, did not write for children, an audience they thought capable only of fairy tales and Christmas pageants" (414). Hatch unearths some children's involvement in the theatrical arm of BAM concentrated in New York City; those included by Hatch are the aforementioned Harlem Children's Theatre Company and Billie Holiday Theater's Theater for Little Folk, as well as Hazel Bryant's Richard Allen Center for Culture and Art's Countee Cullen Storyteller Series and Rosetta LeNoire's AMAS Repertory (Musical) Theatre's Eubie Blake Children's Theatre.

There are very few books in English about Theatre for Youth history, including Nellie McCaslin's *Historical Guide to Children's Theatre in America* (1987) and *Theatre for Children in the United States: A History* (1997). Two others are *Theatre, Children, and Youth* (1987) by Jed H. Davis and Mary Jane Evans; and Roger Bedard and C. John Tolch's *Spotlight on the Child: Studies in the History of American Children's Theatre* (1989). In general, Theatre for Youth history books tend to be less scholarly than BAM history texts and contain little information about theatre for Black children. The entries are scarce and often reflect the white ethnocentrism of the times in which they were written. For example, in Theatre for Youth historian Nellie McCaslin's 1987 *Historical Guide to Children's Theatre*, the author briefly addresses theatre for people of color as "ethnic theatre." Although the categorization of theatre as "ethnic" can be interpreted as descriptive rather than racist, it is problematic in that it serves to

[5] Very little has been written about Black TFY; even less has been written about Black TFY during the Black Arts Movement. This is a typical omission: most often theatre history texts exclude completely or only briefly mention Theatre for Youth.

segregate theatre for people of color from TFY (as presumed to be white), while it also serves to deny that whites have an ethnicity at all.[6] Davis's and Evans's study contains a lengthy inventory of plays for young audiences, but a very small number of these 350 plays contain content relating specifically to the experiences or histories of Black children. Bedard's and Tolch's anthology focuses on case studies of theatre companies and Theatre for Youth movements and of its twelve chapters, only one focuses on theatrical activities with Black youth: "Children's Theatre Activities at Karamu House [in Ohio], 1915-1975."

Promisingly, in McCaslin's latest (1997) edition of *Theatre for Children in the United States: A History*, more equitable attention is given to covering theatre for children of color and serves to provide a brief entrée into theatre for Black children during my period of study. In the chapter covering 1970-1980, McCaslin notes that during this time period attitudes about race shifted in the United States to include a "new recognition of minorities" and that one of the subsequent goals of theatre for children was to promote pride in children's ethnic cultures (*Theatre* 292-293). In the same chapter, she recognizes four theatre companies whose repertoires included plays aimed at a Black child audience: the Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk in Brooklyn, New York; Black Arts West Theatre Company in Seattle, WA; Aduke Aremu's (Gwen Anderson) Harlem Children's Theatre Company in New York; and Howard University Children's Theatre in Washington, D.C. (*Theatre* 305-306). McCaslin lists these theatres while

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[6] Several sociologists have addressed the phenomena of the invisibility of "whiteness" as an ethnic marker (See Howard Winant, Karen Brodkin, and Steve Garner).

providing little detail about them; my study builds upon her entries by further describing and contextualizing the two theatres located in New York City.

Kelsey E. Collie's 1978 article, "The Development of a Black Children's Theatre—A Beginning" engages directly with my research questions regarding the extent to which Black children's theatre of the 1970s was influenced by the aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement. Collie argues that the plays which arose from the Black Theatre Movement of the 1960s were aimed mainly at adults. He writes,

> None [of the BAM plays] could be strictly categorized as children's theatre, and despite the argument by some Black playwrights that their plays were intended for all Black people [...] few parents exposed their children to them. They felt the plays were not suitable in content or language for young, impressionable minds (72).

My study disproves Collie's contention by offering numerous counterexamples of plays aimed at children which arose from the Black Theatre Movement, especially those which took place at the Harlem Children's Theatre Company and the Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk. Although Collie's article is not scholarly, the author contributes to the study of theatre for Black children by providing a prescriptive list of the characteristics he feels Black TFY should possess in the time period immediately following the end of BAM. Collie's opinions carry weight as he has served as Producing-Director of Howard University Children's Theatre and wrote plays for Black children during the 1970s (Collie 70).

Because so little has been written about the place and function of the Black child in performance, scholarly inquiry into another producer of children's culture, that of children's literature, aided me in the initial framing of my project. The field of children's literature engages with questions of 20th C. Black childhood identities and offers not only relevant contextualizing information regarding the historical place and function of the Black child, but also offers models for my research. Laretta Henderson has written about the interrelationships between literature for Black children and the political and social contexts in which they arise. Henderson's article "The Black Arts Movement and African American Young Adult Literature: An Evaluation of Narrative Style," examines the Black Aesthetic's influence on contemporary African-American young adult literature. Eric Schmiedl's 1993 article "Picture This: Black American Directions for Children's Theatre" uses four innovations in "the inclusion of Black American content" in picture books for children and suggests the application of such methods to aide in the development of Black representation in TYA. Schmiedl's concept of applying one avenue of children's culture (picture books), which he sees as reflecting political movements "for equality" in the U.S., to another (TYA) which he does not feel has been successful in this regard is fascinating.

Theatre historiography theories, particularly those of Bruce McConachie and Thomas Postlewait, have influenced my approach to this work. James Hatch's approach to Black Theatre historiography as described in his article "Here Comes Everybody: Scholarship and Black Theatre History" (1989) also informed my work by reminding me of the obstacles to be faced and the multidisciplinary approach required in this undertaking: "Because Afro-American theatre stems from roots on both sides of a hyphen, the hyphen must become a bridge. Africanisms that

survived must be investigated—a difficult task which takes the historian into anthropology, sociology, psychology, and religion, and into unfamiliar cultures" (150).[8] Another layer of multidisciplinarity in my study is found in the inclusion of children and cultural products directed at child audiences; thus, the field of childhood studies, and in particular, ideologies concerning the myth of childhood innocence and concurrent political functions of children in U.S. history (James Kincaid, Henry Jenkins) were essential components of my approach.

In order to thoroughly answer the questions presented earlier concerning Black TFY at the time of the Black Arts Movement, I conducted qualitative and archival research, used primary and secondary sources, and interviewed theatre practitioners of BAM. As I conducted this comparative research, I kept in mind that Black children's lived experiences, geography, material conditions, socio-economic statuses, classes, and education levels varied greatly. In addition, my research focused on Black TFY which took place in the Eastern Region of the United States and though I uncovered trends regarding theatrical practices involving Black children which were different from theatrical practices involving white children, I do not contend that these differing practices occurred concurrently in other regions of the U.S. Here I am influenced by Katya Gibel Azoulay's thoughts regarding the need to carefully consider the diversity of experience and practice in various African-American communities:

> I am not suggesting that different types of cultural articulations – what perhaps may be more usefully seen as styles—and specific institutional structures did not

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[8] In her book about National Black Theatre, Lundeana Thomas describes Africanisms as "cultural artifacts, like speech, music, and dance that survived the infamous middle passage" (5).

> develop among sectors of the African-American community in the United States which were significantly different from various white European-American communities. I am, however, insisting that these are practices and productions which need to be specified, contextualized and problematized - not presumed. (93-94)

In that vein, I must note that my research could have focused on the plethora of theatrical programming for Black children occurring at this time throughout the U.S. under the auspices of the Black Church; however, such a specific focus on Christianity and Christian conceptions of Black children falls outside the bounds of what I have attempted here by focusing strictly on the influence of Black Arts ideology in secular Theatre for Youth. Concurrently, I recognize that I could have attempted to expand upon other companies described by McCaslin in other geographic areas which produced Black Theatre for Youth, or others not studied elsewhere in depth such as Kuumba Workshop and ETA Creative Arts Foundation in Chicago. Yet I instead chose to focus my research on an examination of select theatrical companies which produced theatre for and conducted theatre with Black youth in a *specific* geographic location during a *specific* time period. In total, I studied five theatre companies; three of which focused explicitly on performances for and with children (Harlem Children's Theatre Company, Marjorie Moon's Billie Holiday Theater's Theater for Little Folk, and Rosetta LeNoire's AMAS Musical Theatre's Eubie Blake Children's Theatre) and two that directed the majority of their works to adult audiences but contained active children's theatrical programs (Amiri Baraka's Spirit House Movers and Players and Dr. Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre). In order to learn about how each of these theatre companies engaged with and constructed the Black child I conducted

archival research at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and at the Hatch-Billops Collection, Inc., both housed in New York City. The Schomburg contains a wealth of historical artifacts about Black culture and contains primary materials about AMAS Musical Theatre's Eubie Blake Children's Theatre, Amiri Baraka's children's school, and the New York City Black theatre organizations Black Theatre Alliance and AUDELCO or the Audience Development Committee. The Hatch-Billops Collection provided me with invaluable information about the Harlem Children's Theatre Company and the Billie Holiday Theater, including grant applications and copies of promotional materials.

I interviewed the founder of HCTC, Aduke Aremu on three occasions by phone. I also conducted a phone interview with Abisola Faison, assistant to Teer at the NBT for over thirty years. These interviews provided me with first-hand knowledge about specific plays and practices which is not available elsewhere. With regard to secondary sources, my research proved fruitful and the sources I have found provide the socio-political and historical context essential to achieving a quality historiographical analysis. The Black newspaper the *New York Amsterdam News* is available in a full-text version on-line and provided me important access to theatre reviews, feature stories, and advertising about theatrical productions involving Black children and youth. *The New York Times* also covered theatre events for children from time to time including productions by Harlem Children's Theatre Company and Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk. As my Works Cited indicates, I consulted many other sources about Black theatre, in particular articles and books which focus on Black theatre history in the U.S. as well as those which detail the ideologies and productions of the theatrical arm of the Black Arts Movement.

The first chapter, "Setting the Stage: The History of the Black Child in American Theatre," serves as an introduction to the origins of the Black child on the American stage. It provides the reader with the historical context necessary to understand the images of the Black child which Black Arts Movement proponents fought to overturn. This chapter begins with a discussion of the power of imagery. It continues with an overview of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the stereotypical images of African Americans, especially children, propagated by theatrical adaptations of Stowe's novel. Next, the proliferation of the picaninny image, of a "savage" and "untamable" Black child which arose from the minstrel versions of Stowe's novel will be explored. The chapter closes with the attempted reclamation of the image of the African American child by proponents of the New Negro movement and a synopsis of children's involvement in pageantry, such as in W. E. B. DuBois's 1913 *Star of Ethiopia*, in this reclamation. Toward the end of the chapter I draw heavily on Katherine Capshaw Smith's research about children's culture during the Harlem Renaissance including "Constructing a Shared History: Black Pageantry for Children During the Harlem Renaissance" (1999) and *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (2006).

Chapter 2 "For Young Brothas and Sistahs: The Black Arts Movement's Youth Connection and Supporting Mechanisms for Black Theatre for Youth" deepens the discourse by examining the place of Black children and youth within the Black Arts Movement and within the greater historical context of 1965-1980. In order to do that, BAM's formation and aesthetics are explored along with the organizations and ideologies of the Revolutionary Action Movement

(RAM), Nation of Islam, and Maulauna Karenga's US organization[9] (not to be confused with U.S. or United States) which laid BAM's foundation. Attention is paid toward concisely analyzing Black children's place within these movements and ideologies. The manifestation of BAM ideologies and aesthetics in theatre for adults is addressed, briefly covering the influences and work of Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones) and Ed Bullins. BAM proponents Sonia Sanchez's and Nikki Giovanni's ideas concerning children and their creation of cultural products for children are examined. [10] Finally, I present the government intervention of funding summer arts programming and the formations of AUDELCO and the Black Theatre Alliance: the former being two organizational mechanisms formed within Black communities which helped birth Black Theatre for Youth of this era.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 6 Iexamine one of the following New York City theatre companies: the Harlem Children's Theatre Company, the Billie Holiday Theater's Theater for Little Folks, and Rosetta LeNoire's AMAS Musical Theatre's Eubie Blake Children's Theatre. In each

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[9] There is disagreement about what US stands for, however, Scot Ngozi-Brown attempted to clear up the confusion by stating that the Black Panthers continually derided the group by referring to it as "United Slaves," although the group itself never referred to its members that way (163). Ngozi-Brown states, "The name 'Us' actually means Black people: The pronoun 'Us' as opposed to 'them,' the White oppressors—as an article written in the journal *Black Dialogue* in 1966 states…" (163).

[10] Many extant studies cover BAM and Black theatre as a part of the movement in relation to adult participation and representation (See James Smethurst, Mance Williams, and others).

chapter I cover each company's contributions to Black Theatre for Youth. My examination of the companies is framed in part by my attempt to determine the influence (or lack thereof) of the Black Aesthetic on their plays for and work with children. This examination is accomplished by analyzing each company's plays, workshops/drama classes with children, uses of children as performers, and philosophies concerning theatrical work with Black children and youth. Vivian Robinson's AUDELCO (Audience Development Committee Inc.) formed in New York City in 1973 to both increase the numbers of Blacks attending Black theatre and to present awards for "excellence in Black theatre" (Robinson 79); although the majority of its awards recognized theatre for adults (including National Black Theatre and AMAS's founder Rosetta LeNoire), the significance of AUDELCO's recognition of HCTC and Theatre for Little Folk will be investigated.

In the fifth chapter, "Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre and Amiri Baraka's Spirit House Theatre for Youth programs," I examine the significant and under-researched works for Black children carried out by two organizations led by major artists of the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka and Barbara Ann Teer at their respective companies in Newark, NJ and in Harlem. The underlying religious or spiritual ideologies of both companies and the concurrent influence on the kind of works produced with and for children will be explored. Teer's theatre incorporated elements of the Black Pentecostal church with African rituals, while Baraka's focused on the fusion of Muslim beliefs with an agit-prop style of theatre. Black children and youth were a focus of both of these theatre companies and the commonalities and differences between the respective companies' approaches to their work with these populations will be examined in depth in this chapter. Here I explore and analyze the extent to which children

at each company served as producers of culture for other children, both as playwrights and performers.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes my findings and analysis of the extent to which the Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetic held sway over productions aimed at Black youth in the Eastern region of the U.S. How successfully Black TFY at this time period achieved the goal begun during the Harlem Renaissance of rehumanizing and reclaiming the image of the Black child is be explored. This chapter also suggests directions for future research in the field of Black TFY.

Chapter 1

Setting the Stage: Historical Origins of Black Children in American Theatre

It is no accident that the word stereotype was first a printer's term for a stamp cut that could be inserted with text in a linotype machine. As multiple images are reproduced they forge in the viewer's mind an association with the represented individual as a type, reduced to essential graspable characteristics and behaviors, leaving no room for a fully fleshed-out humanity. (Morgan 8).

Images can affect people in realms just beyond language and below rational consciousness; harmful images imposed from power are more difficult to subvert than language. (Language, after all, is available to common folks and often is enlivened with new twists, spins, and value-added meanings in vernacular culture, but images are produced by the few to be consumed but seldom manipulated by the masses. (Harris, *Colored Pictures* 14)

This chapter traces the origins of the Black child on the American stage to provide the reader with the historical context necessary to understand the images of the Black child which Black Arts Movement theatre artists sought to overturn. These stereotypical images, which portrayed Black children in an overwhelmingly negative and subhuman light, were so prevalent in the 19th and early to mid- 20th centuries that they permeated the nation's subconscious. Much of these images originated in 19th century minstrelsy and carried over into other media such as film, advertising, and, to use Patricia A. Turner's term, "contemptible collectibles." She defines these collectibles as "…physical, tangible artifacts that embody a derogatory image of Blacks" (7). Turner describes "the most popular icons" as those which,

> contain safe, nonthreatening, servile depictions of Blacks or those that imply inherent ineptness and implicitly will prevent the race from earning social and political parity. This pattern can be seen by examining the clothes and facial

> expressions of the men, women, and children as they are rendered in the objects, as well as the objects and products with which they are constantly juxtaposed. (12-13)

Some of the most deeply disturbing images covered in Turner's study "humorously" portray Black children on picture postcards as "alligator food"; others sexualize Black children, especially girls, by portraying them only partially clothed and often in sexually suggestive positions. Examples of contemptible collectibles are presented en masse in the Spike Lee film *Bamboozled* (2000); some of the most striking images in the film are the cartoons portraying Black children as "picaninnies" and the animated version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* wherein an elderly Tom runs away from Simon Legree as Legree chases him with a whip.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the power of imagery. It continues with an overview of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the stereotypical images of African Americans, especially children, propagated by theatrical adaptations of Stowe's novel. Next, the proliferation of the picaninny image will be explored as well as the use of derogatory and inhumane images of African American children in commercial products and media throughout the late 19th and mid-20th centuries. The chapter closes with the attempted reclamation of the image of the African American child by proponents of the New Negro movement and a synopsis of the use of children's involvement in pageantry, such as in W. E. B. DuBois's 1913 *Star of Ethiopia*, in this reclamation.

The cultural impact of imagery cannot be underestimated. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall is helpful here in his views regarding the linkages between culture, identity, and agency. Chris

Rojek describes Hall's ideas about culture and knowledge: "…identity, history, agency, and practice are not fixed entities but parts of a system of representation which is permanently *in process*" (original emphasis, 2). The collective impact of decades of garish images of African Americans inflicted tremendous damage to this group. Thomas writes, "The White takeover of minstrelsy succeeded in fixing deep in the subconscious of White Americans the idea that all Blacks were shiftless, lazy, thick-lipped watermelon eaters and gin guzzlers who abused the English language" (12). The historical existence of racist images of Blacks is fixed and unalterable; however the real identities of those depicted, and their progeny, shift constantly. Michael Harris's study of race in Western art incorporates Hall's ideas regarding discourses and perception and explores how depictions of Blacks in art have historically served to further racist ideology. Hall's ideas of opposing identities are particularly relevant to Harris's analysis: "…Hall maintains that the Western episteme was founded on a series of binary oppositions, the most important of which is the opposition between identity and other" (5). Harris aptly differentiates between the power embedded in imagery and the power of language. He writes,

> Images devised to construct a concept of Blacks in the 19th century in support of racist ideology were commonly accompanied by correlative language, whether to describe Blacks or to represent them through dialogue. Because meaning cannot be completely fixed, Blacks have worked to resist and undermine those verbal representations in a variety of ways. (5)

Much of the problem of uncovering the history of Black representation in imagery and on stage stems from the conflation of racist imagery with African Americans self-representation. Here I am referring to the confusion surrounding what is called or considered "Black memorabilia,"

wherein antique dealers and collectors have grouped material objects which depict Blacks, sometimes in caricatured, subhuman ways along with material objects created by Blacks which do not carry offensive depictions. The grouping results in Black art, especially folk art, created by Black artists to be lumped together with mostly white-created, offensive, racist depictions. Turner criticizes the idea that contemptible collectibles can in any way be categorized as "Black memorabilia"; she describes the first three chapters of her book *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies* (1994) as working to show how "even after the institution of slavery was over, American consumers found acceptable ways of buying and selling the souls of Black folk" through offensive consumer goods (11). In the following quote, Ralph Ellison speaks about the literal representations of Blacks in minstrelsy and how they negatively influenced the metaphorical images of Blacks in the public mind. In his 1964 essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ellison compares slavery with the grotesque misrepresentations of Black Americans in minstrelsy and finds the misrepresentation to be more damaging. He writes,

> Being "highly pigmented," as the sociologists say, it was our Negro 'misfortune' to be caught up associatively in the negative side of this basic dualism of the white folk mind, and to be shackled to almost everything it would repress from conscience and consciousness. *The physical hardships and indignities of slavery were benign compared with this continuing debasement of our image*. Because these things are bound up with their notion of chaos it is almost impossible for many whites to consider questions of sex, women, economic opportunity, the national identity, historic change, social justice—even the criminality implicit in

> the broadening of freedom itself—without summoning malignant images of Black men into consciousness. (emphasis mine, *Shadow and Act* 48)

The debasing images of Blacks which Ellison, Turner, and Harris have described were found throughout American culture, and culture aimed at white children was no exception, especially during the antebellum era. Sarah Roth's article about 19th century children's literature describes how the stories found therein denied Blacks full humanity. She states,

> Women who composed children's fiction in the early nineteenth century prevented the African Americans they portrayed from exercising their right to serve as loving parents to their children. Instead, Black characters prioritized the happiness of white children over that of their Black sons and daughters. (95-96)

These novels written for children held a significant cultural impact on the white children who either read the stories themselves or were read to by others. Roth explains,

> Until American popular culture could successfully shed the bifurcated image of the doting Black mammy and the menacing Black rebel, successive generations of white children would continue to grow up confident in their belief that African Americans deserved to be excluded from the political, legal, and even human rights that white Americans had so long claimed for themselves. (109)

Furthermore, Roth posits that the novels aimed at adults during this time period also portrayed African American slaves as valuing white families over their own, "Because the slave characters paid the children of their masters so much attention, however, their own children were often ignored or neglected…. This strategy therefore served to devalue further both Black children and

the Black family" (99-100). Thus, both children's literature and its adult counterpart propagated negative images of Black adults as being childlike, and Black children being less valuable to their parents than the children of white masters.

The 19th century novel and play *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reinforced the gross, extant misrepresentations of African American adults and children. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or, Life among the Lowly* was originally published in serial form over the course of 40 weeks in the Abolitionist magazine *National Era* in the year 1851. Stowe came from an Abolitionist family and wrote the story as a response to the 1850 passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. [11] In 1852, John Jewett published the story as a novel and the book became the second-best selling in the nineteenth century, second only to the Bible. According to Kim Euell, Abraham Lincoln attributed the novel as contributing to the start of the Civil War. The novel has not only impacted American popular culture but also culture throughout the world; *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been translated into 58 languages and dialects (Euell 668).

Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (UTC) contains numerous characters, but the plot primarily follows the lives of three Kentucky slaves: Uncle Tom, Eliza, and George. Tom, along with Eliza's four-year-old son Harry, are sold off of the Shelby plantation to pay for Master

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[11]. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 held Federal Marshalls and other officials responsible for arresting alleged runaway slaves; if they did not do so they were liable to pay a $1000 fine. Persons suspected of being runaway slaves had no rights to jury trial or to testify in their own defense. Furthermore, those who helped a runaway slave by way of offering food or shelter could be put in prison for six months and subject to pay a $1000 fine.

Shelby’s debts. This transaction threatens to separate Eliza from her child and Tom from his wife Chloe and their three children. Rather than abide the sale of her son, Eliza decides to escape to the North; in order to do so she crosses the frozen Ohio River while carrying Harry. George also escapes (he is owned by a different master) and with the help of the Quakers, the whole family manages to make it to safety and freedom in Canada.

The trajectory of Uncle Tom’s life is not so idyllic. Tom is originally sold to a “kind” master, Augustine St. Clare, and develops a close friendship with St. Clare’s sickly young daughter Eva. In the St. Clare household Stowe introduces the character of Topsy, a young ill-kempt slave girl who had never known her parents. Topsy behaves naughtily until Eva’s love for her exerts a positive influence on her behavior and treatment of others. Due to a series of unfortunate events, including the deaths of Eva and Augustine, the freedom Augustine promised Tom never comes and Augustine’s widow instead sells him to the sadistically abusive Simon Legree. Legree has Tom whipped to death because of his refusal to tell Legree the location of two runaway slaves and also because Tom claims the Christian God as his true master—not Legree.

Although Stowe’s novel was abolitionist, its depictions of Blacks in contemporary American culture are now considered racist, and the worldview from which Stowe wrote UTC was one of white supremacy. Part of the novel’s popularity stemmed from its functioning to maintain the myth of white supremacy in a format that appealed to white adult consumers. One way in which the adult slaves and their children were simultaneously dehumanized in literature of the era was through the portrayal of adult slaves as neglectful, and in some cases, physically

abusive to their offspring. We see this in the "Mammy" stereotype, in particular. Patricia Hill Collins writes

> Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behavior. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her White children and 'family' better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power. Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her White 'family,' the mammy still knows her 'place' as obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination. (n. pag.)

Stowe herself fell prey to this depiction of Black women. For example, near the beginning of Stowe's novel, Tom's wife Chloe is seen to treat Master Shelby's son George with reverence and tenderness, which contrasts sharply with the rude manner in which she treats her own children. [12] Here is what Chloe says in this exchange:

> Here you, Mose and Pete! get out de way, you niggers! Get away, Polly, honey, — mammy'll give her baby somefin, by and by. Now, Mas'r George, you jest take off dem books, and set down now with my old man, and I'll take up de sausages,

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[12]. As mentioned earlier, the novel was originally published in serial form. In novel form the story was told in 45 chapters; the quoted exchange takes place in Chapter 4.

> and have de first griddle full of cakes on your plates in less dan no time. (Stowe 23)

Roth details how Chloe's behavior and the behavior other slaves showed to their children in mid-19th century literature served to perpetuate and further support white hegemony. She writes,

> The good-natured physical abuse Black parents in novels of the 1850s dealt out to their Black sons and daughters reinforced the message to white readers that Black children did not deserve the immutable tenderness lighter-skinned children did. […] Though Chloe meant no real harm toward her young sons, the repeated roughness this Black mother displayed and the comedic value Stowe evidently intended this scene to have reinforced the notion that the mistreatment of Black children should not be taken very seriously. (102)

The depiction of Blacks as bad or neglectful parents also influenced the way Black children themselves were portrayed. As Turner explains,

> Children are not expected to be responsible for keeping themselves clean; rather their parents are expected to keep them tidy. Many twentieth-century consumers may mistakenly assume that antebellum African-American parents possessed full control over the appearance and behavior of their offspring. Convincing themselves that Black parents are inherently indifferent to their children's well-being enables whites to justify their treatment of African Americans as second-class citizens. (16)

Although Stowe wrote UTC from a position of privilege situated in white hegemony, her aim was abolitionist and Stowe had no intention of her novel being misused in theatrical adaptations to demean Blacks. Her original goal in writing UTC was undermined because of its publication three years before the establishment of copyright law in the U.S.; consequently, Stowe had no rights regarding its creation as a theatrical production. In fact the Temperance singer Asa Hutchinson approached Stowe with a request to dramatize the novel and Stowe refused with, "It is thought, with the present state of theatrical performances in this country, that any attempt on the part of Christians to identify themselves with them will be productive of danger to the individual character, and to the general cause" (qtd. in Reynolds 151). Nonetheless, adaptations of UTC quickly made it to the stage and Stowe's abolitionist intent was all but forgotten in these productions.

Much of the demand for the "Uncle Tom shows" grew from the public's desire to view images of slavery in the United States. Turner notes that after the Civil War, the demand to nostalgically remember slavery grew because it was both reassuring to whites and highly profitable: "Reaping profits from the sense of superiority and comfort these icons offered, generation after generation of entrepreneurs packaged and repackaged nonthreatening depictions of Blacks" (29). About the reaction of slavery advocates to the novel, Turner writes,

> Pro-slavery writers countered charges of cruelty by characterizing slave/master relationships as warm familial ones and claiming that lively slave music and ribald humor were rampant on the plantations. The latter view provided excellent fodder for theatrical producers who were determined to lure urban white audiences into theaters. (45)

For eighty years, stage depictions of UTC dominated American theatre and the highly edited story was the most popular play in the United States (Reynolds 152). James Frick writes

> While Mrs. Stowe's novel reached roughly 300,000 readers in the year following its publication, theatre historians estimate that more than twice that number were exposed to one or more of the stage adaptations; and that arguably the stage version may have made more of an impact due to its mode of presentation: as a moral reform melodrama. (n. pag.)

Actor George L. Aiken wrote the first “successful” theatrical adaptation of UTC which premiered in Troy, New York on Sept. 27, 1852 (Reynolds 151). Aiken’s first version removed the Legree plantation completely, but Aiken later included it upon the public’s demand for the whole story (151). Many other stage versions existed, including the H.C. Conway version produced by P.T. Barnum and a version by C.W. Taylor (Hirsch 324; Frick). [13] So great was the demand for theatrical versions of UTC that a new vocabulary emerged: productions came to be known as “Tom shows” and the performers as “Tommers” (Turner 78). In the UTC stage productions white working-class audiences initially filled the seats; later white middle-class audiences who previously held negative views toward the theatre began to attend as well (O’Loughlin 576). [14] By 1879, traveling companies who performed some version of UTC

[13]. My research has not been successful in determining the exact number of UTC theatrical versions despite many attempts.

[14]. Blacks were not allowed to enter the theaters where UTC played until August 18, 1953 (Austin 238).

numbered at least 49 (Turner 78). For many years, white performers played all of the UTC roles shows in Blackface.

Stowe's original story became repackaged to make a mockery of African Americans on stage in part to make it more commercially viable due to competition among the many simultaneously-running versions. Reynolds writes about some of the changes made to Stowe's original story in the theatrical versions,

> But with more and more versions and more and more troupes to play them, the book was seldom followed. For example, in one script, Legree kills St. Clare and is in turn shot by Marks [a slave-catcher who pursues Eliza and George], who orders Sambo and Quimbo [two of Legree's slaves] to throw him to the hogs. In the original, Legree never meets St. Clare, and the reformed Marks is last seen in Indiana. And more and more the comic and melodramatic elements were exploited; Topsy, for instance, sang comic songs and became a caricature. A few versions were even proslavery! (152)

Other scholars have also described changes made to the story to make it more marketable as a stage show. Many of these changes resulted in the debasement and emasculation of the character of Uncle Tom. Kim Euell writes:

> These "Tom shows," as they came to be known, were similar to minstrel shows in that the Black characters were predominantly portrayed by Northern whites who had little if any experience with Blacks. Uncle Tom, who in Stowe's novel had been a strong, robust, laboring family man, on stage was transformed into a meek,

> pious, old Negro—the archetypal 'Uncle.' This revision served the aims of pro-slavery propagandists by portraying Blacks as dependent rather than self-sufficient. (669)

Michele Wallace illustrates other adaptations made to the character of Uncle Tom in stage productions. She writes,

> Uncle Tom as created by Harriet Beecher Stowe was nothing like the flat stock figure who has come down to us, mostly through the interventions of theatre and film, as a white-identified, elderly and cowardly bootlicker. … [In the novel] he is large, strong, betrays no trace of cowardice, and there is no question that he hates slavery, and wants more than anything else to be free, although not at any cost. (145)

Theatre historian Errol Hill states that "One result of this debasement of the Uncle Tom drama was to fix in the public mind for decades the Black performer's role on the professional stage as a song-and-dance entertainer or a comic buffoon" (56-57).

The depictions of the child characters in these various theatrical incarnations matter because of the plays' immense popularity and the power literal images carry to influence public perception of those they (mis)represent. Although the story and many of the play versions focus on interactions between adult slaves and slave owners (with the exception of the relationship between Uncle Tom and Little Eva), the depictions of the child character of Topsy exerted an enduring influence on the depictions of African American children. Topsy holds the "distinction" of being the quintessential picaninny of American cultural history: we see the continuing influence of Topsy in the current (2012) vernacular in the common colloquial expressions

"growing like Topsy" and "Topsy-Turvy," which originated with her. Turner writes, "Topsy-like images are evident in all forms of contemptible collectibles. Numerous dolls and other children's toys are inscribed with attributes quite similar to the ones that Stowe enumerated in introducing the character" (14). The image of the beaming, dancing, rough-and-tumble "picaninny" came to be a central product of minstrelsy and although it did not originate with staged versions of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the massive proliferation of these shows added much to the image's visibility and power as an icon.

Historically, Topsy matters because as Wallace writes, "Critics and fans alike credit the book [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*] with having provided the first easily exportable image-text for immediate and popular consumption depicting the plight of the slave in the U.S. South" (141). Topsy as an icon became a valuable commodity both in the U.S. and abroad. As the number of UTC traveling troupes grew, in order to make some versions more commercially competitive Topsy was refashioned into a caricature and even danced the cakewalk (Reynolds 152). [15] Stowe intended Topsy to be a sympathetic character, an unfortunate human product of plantation slavery; Euell writes, "Topsy, the slave urchin, was a character that Stowe created to evoke sympathy for the tragic circumstances that created children who, having been purchased in infancy by speculators and raised like cattle for the auction block, didn't know their parents" (669). In contrast, the stage Topsy came to be a buffoon for the white audiences' enjoyment. In fact, it appears that Topsy's refashioning became a major selling-point in the UTC plays. In

[15]. There are several definitions of the cakewalk, but Michael Harris's definitions is the most succinct that I have found. He defines the cakewalk as "a dance devised by African Americans to spoof the formal promenades of whites through exaggerated gesture" (86).

Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture, Jo-Ann Morgan writes that based on the talents of each traveling Tom troupe, some characters would be exaggerated while other characters would be invented; productions called "Double Mammoth" indicated that their shows had two Topsys (3). Furthermore, Judith Williams reports that Topsy was so popular that, "Within the milieu of the 'Tom Shows,' Topsy has a tendency to just grow. There arose shows in which the original story of Tom was excised from the presentation and the interactions of Topsy and Little Eva were emphasized" (24).

In her book *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*, Jayna Brown explores the origins of the stage picaninny from a dance history lens and focuses on the picaninny choruses, led by adult singers, that toured in the United Kingdom and Europe in the 1900s and 1910s (20). Her analysis offers a telling etymology of the word "picaninny" which is relevant to this study of the Black child onstage. According to Brown:

> The term picaninny comes from *picayune*, a coin of small value circulating in the United States during the 1800s. The derivation of the term picaninny signals the interchangeability between the Black child bodies and the small bits of money required for their acquisition. Not always purchased but often "made" on the plantation, they embodied the very public marketplace politics of sexualized subjection at the heart of the domestic sphere. (24)

Brown also notes that "mischievous and often unruly 'picaninnies'" came to be stock characters seen (and often heard) in advertisements, minstrelsy, and in music (26). Euell writes about how

the stage depiction of Topsy played into and expanded upon the picaninny stereotype. She writes,

> She [Topsy] was portrayed as a dirty, ignorant, mischievous imp who reveled in her misfortune—the prototype of 'the pickaninny.' Also a tool of pro-slavery forces, she was intended to show Black children as animal-like creatures uniquely adapted to thrive within the confines of that institution. (669)

O'Loughlin describes Topsy as a "character without a personal narrative. […] It is partly this lack of a personal narrative that explains Topsy's function within slavery as a commodity" (580). Taken further, one can see how Topsy signified the hundreds of thousands of children born into slavery in the United States whose personal narratives were never recorded and without a history to claim as their own. [16] Moreover, the character of Topsy in the novel lacks a personal narrative and on stage Topsy lacked the body of a female child, even though in Stowe's writing she was depicted as an 8 or 9 year old girl. Black female adult actors eventually began to play the role, but for many years the actors who played Topsy were white women or occasionally boys (Williams 19, 22). This practice begs the question as to why adult white women were chosen to portray Topsy and to this question there is no satisfactory answer. Brown observes that during the turn of the 19th century, women and children were viewed almost ubiquitously: "Like children, women were imagined as susceptible to outside stimuli, easily impressionable, emotionally immediate. Both were prone to misbehavior, both were in need of guidance and

[16]. Exact numbers of children born into slavery who became slaves are unknown because the record keeping was so poor.

discipline" (71). The casting choice lead to potential subversion of "The Cult of True Womanhood" that white women faced at the time, but did not serve any similar emancipatory function for Black girls. In fact, casting women as girls led to making an even further mockery of Black children as Brown notes:

> In this Blackface act, the adult woman's body is transmogrified into the body of a prepubescent girl. […] Disavowed or made diminutive, forced back into a child's body, female sexual maturity returns in the form of the grotesque, the monstrous, the heathenous. (71)

Williams notes that

> Behaviors that in children are merely unseemly become vulgar when demonstrated by an adult woman. The illusion of childhood also increases the sense of potential and possibility that surrounds Topsy; in a child "wickedness" has a more innocent connotation than in an adult woman. (22)

Because white men did not play the role of Topsy in Blackface and it was instead played by white women in Blackface, the popularity of UTC and the character of Topsy offered white women an entry-point into theatrical performance. As Williams writes "For most white actresses, Topsy was the most promising role in the Tom Circuit" and "became a testing ground for young actresses to prove their mettle" (24).

Interestingly, Blackface minstrelsy influenced depictions of Blacks in children's literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in so doing, generations of white children who never attended productions of UTC were still exposed to caricatures of Blacks found onstage

and, it stands to reason, formed their opinions of Blacks based in part on these images. Roth writes,

> Children's fiction thus helped bring about the era of "racial modernity" that James Brewer Stewart has suggested prevailed among white northerners during the 1820s and 1830s. In Stewart's definition, racial modernity meant that whites judged the status of all African Americans solely on the basis of their race, not by their level of education, economic achievement, or moral character. (82)

Nineteenth and early twentieth-century producers of children's culture in forms other than theatre extended their interest in Blacks to babies and children. As Wallace writes, "Of course, this interest in Black infants was not always benign, as is clear in such films as *The Gator and the Pickaninny* (Edison, 1903) or *Ten Pickaninnies* (Edison, 1908) in which the 'Ten Little Darkies' eating watermelon are picked off by the farmer, one by one, as in the juvenile ditty 'Ten Little Injuns'" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 140).

The gross racial/racist misrepresentations detailed above have affected Black children especially, in part because their identity as children has limited their political and cultural agency. All children in the United States are considered "minors" until the age of 18: They are not considered fully-developed adults according to the law and thusly not allowed to vote and participate in other activities widely believed to be in the purview of adult life, such as consume controlled substances (i.e. alcohol and tobacco) and engage in sexual activity. However, in the case of Black children, a double-minority status exists wherein members of this population are minors according to the law and belong to a historically marginalized and oppressed minority

group. Academic study of this particular "double-bind" status is limited, but Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins's work about the societal status of Black women can aide in understanding this phenomenon. She writes

> As part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood have taken on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or creating new ones. Hazel Carby suggests that the objective of stereotypes is 'not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations' (1987, 22). These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life. (Hill Collins)

Turner, too, sees a connection between the dehumanizing images of Black children and governmental decisions which directly affected them. She writes,

> It is likely that the notion that Black children are animallike [sic] and savage has influenced public policy. After all, leaders in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s grew up and absorbed the images discernible in the popular culture of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. In these decades, access to African-American history as we know it today was limited. It seems safe to assume that in making decisions and forming policies about educational entitlement and support for underprivileged families, some elected and appointed public servants still envision the undeserving raucous,

> ill-kept Black children prominently displayed in advertising copy and picture postcards. (17-18)

By the turn of the 20th century, African Americans began to seriously rethink the ideas and images of race and identity which had been propagated by whites for so long. Several overlapping events and movements occurred around this time which resulted in the birth of the New Negro ideal. One event which catalyzed African Americans was the election of Woodrow Wilson as President in 1912: He segregated federal jobs which Capshaw Smith credits as "…a move that prompted Black elites, many of whom had taken pride in their government positions, to join the nascent NAACP" (*Childhood* 798). [17] From 1916-1920, NAACP membership grew greatly and served to bring Black elites and Black masses together (*Childhood* 798). The Great Migration of African Americans from rural areas of the southern United States to both cities in the South and cities in the North was another factor. After World War I, between 700,000 and 1 million Blacks left the south and between 800,000 to 1 million more joined them in the 1920s (Trotter 31). The rationale for leaving was three-fold: moving north presented "…an alternative to sharecropping, disenfranchisement, and racial injustice in the South" (31). Furthermore, northern industrial cities offered much higher wages than in the agriculturally-based Southern economy (31).

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[17]. NAACP is an acronym which stands for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which began in 1909. W.E.B. Du Bois served as one of the organization's founders.

By the end of WWI (1914-1918), African Americans had become more conscious of their position as disenfranchised Americans, in part because of the treatment they received in their new locations. As Trotter explains,

> …as their [African Americans'] numbers increased in northern and western cities, they faced growing restrictions on where they could stay, educate their children, and gain access to much needed social services and public accommodations. Race violence erupted in Chicago, East St. Louis, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia during the era of the Great Migration. (33)

The status of Black soldiers during World War I also catalyzed frustration among Blacks; the U.S. military forbade Blacks from serving on the front lines because of the fallacious belief that they were inferior to white soldiers—this practice continued until WWII with the Tuskegee Airmen.[18] After the end of WWI, many Black veterans received disrespectful and sometimes hateful treatment by whites, which is in part what led to the race riots of 1919. Known as the

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[18]. The Tuskegee Airman were the original group of black pilots trained for combat by the Air Force. Their main duties included protecting harbors in Italy and protecting American bombers from being shot down by German fighter planes (Simkins n. pag.). De Shields explains that "the early successes of the Tuskegee Airmen and other black units paved the way towards fully integrating the military. […] The experiment and the participation African-Americans made during war time from World War II right on to the Vietnam War enabled us to make a change in civilian life. It shows you that blacks and whites working together, can work on an integrated basis. It shows that it does not disrupt the morale of the troops" (qtd. in Simkins n. pag.).

"Red Summer," the time period between April 1919 and October 1919 saw riots in 22 American cities in which 74 Black people were lynched (Norvell and Tuttle 209). In 1966, William M. Tuttle Jr. wrote about the causes of the race riots in the *Journal of Negro History*:

> In a nation motivated in great measure at this time by prejudice and intolerance—as evidenced by the xenophobia of the Red Scare—Negroes were highly susceptible objects of aggression. They possessed appropriate stimulus characteristics: that is, they were visibly distinct, their behavior was ostensibly strange or alien, and the white populace had long been apathetic to them. (Norvell and Tuttle 210)

Furthermore, Blacks who had migrated North competed with whites in industrial labor, and, in cities like Chicago, they also competed for representation in political offices (210).

With the growing intolerance for "their lot," African Americans began to demand better treatment by whites. As several sources attest, many modern African Americans were fed up with their being treated, and depicted, as "Uncle Toms" or "Topsys." In his letter to the editor of the *Chicago Daily News*, less than a month after the Chicago riot of 1919, Stanley B. Norvell attempted an explanation of the causes of the riots from, as it was referred to at the time, a "Negro" perspective:

> You will find that "Uncle Tom," that charming old figure of literature contemporary with the war of rebellion is quite dead now and that his prototypes are almost as extinct as the great auk, the dodo bird…. You will have committed an unpardonable faux pas if you should happen to call any eminently respectable

> old colored lady "mammy" or "auntie," and yet there still remain many misguided and well-intentioned folks of the white race who persist in so doing. (Norvell and Tuttle 211)

More recently, Errol Hill's 2003 reflection of this time period also touched upon the death of the Uncle Tom characters' reign as acceptable characterizations of African Americans. Hill states that "In response to these new outrages, Black leaders declared the advent of the New Negro whose militancy would finally obliterate the notion of the impotent Tom, resigned to persecution and second-class citizenship" (Hill 58). The New Negro movement was filled with organizations, activities, and institutions designed and run by African Americans, such as "…churches, mutual aid societies, fraternal orders, and social clubs, the establishment of a range of new business and professional services, and launch[ing] of diverse labor, civil rights, and political organizations" (Trotter 33).

One aspect of this time period which has been heretofore under-researched is the idea of the Black child as the embodiment of the New Negro. Between 1916 and 1920, Black elites paid great attention to "codifying the rules of proper middle-class behavior" through etiquette and conduct books (Capshaw Smith, *Childhood* 795). In her article about these books, Capshaw Smith explores how the texts served as a bridge between what older generations of Black elites valued and the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. Of particular note is Capshaw Smith's emphasis on Black childhood and how Black children were seen as playing a role to create "an innovative vision of Black identity" (*Childhood* 795-796). These conduct books depicted child bodies as malleable—thus the perfect site for formation of a new Black identity (799). The books emphasized proper (read: white) forms of speech along with a focus on keeping children's bodies

clean in (800-801). To me, this dual focus on Black children's speech and hygiene is a direct reaction to the decades of picaninny imagery. Furthermore, Capshaw Smith notes that many of the photographs in one of the conduct books

> …document a model, middle-class childhood; children play with dolls, read, listen to their parents, and attend school. These images align with photographs of the Black middle class in the *Crisis* [Du Bois's publication] that served as 'antidotes' (Carroll 23) to visual stereotyping in the white press. (804)

Capshaw Smith finds that because these conduct books were addressed to young people and not to adults they "acknowledge that children have power as active social participants who can influence the character of 'the race'" (*Childhood* 799).

The topic of the New Negro is complex and other theatre scholars such as David Krasner have studied it in depth.[19] For my purposes it is important to understand how the ideals of the New Negro functioned as an attempt by African Americans to reclaim the image of Black children to counter the prevalence of minstrel and picanniny imagery. To that end, how did New Negro ideology manifest in theatre and performance and how were Black children portrayed therein? To begin, one must examine the ideas in circulation during the Harlem Renaissance. One such idea, that of African American modernity, is succinctly covered by Krasner:

> [B]lack modernity surfaced through the paradox of autonomy and solidarity. Furthermore, Black modernity was a complex mixture of ideas and movements—

[19]. See Krasner's *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance 1910-1927* (2002).

> migratory, urbanized, intellectualized, fragmentary, literary, oral, folk, jazz, blues, rhythmic, Western, and Afrocentric—that created a complex, hybrid form. But one thing remained constant: Black modernity represented a desire to *transform the image of Black culture from minstrelsy to sophisticated urbanity*. (original emphasis, *Beautiful Pageant* 10)

Middle-class Blacks did not provide major support for theatre in the early 1920s because to them, "…theatre 'meant' minstrelsy and should thus be avoided" (Krasner 212). That being said, Alain Locke's 1925 anthology *The New Negro* dedicates a section to drama. Montgomery Gregory's essay "The Drama of Negro Life" contained in Locke's book covers the history of Negro drama from Shakespeare's *Othello* to the 1923 establishment of Raymond O'Neill's Ethiopian Art Theatre. About Topsy, Gregory writes

> Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* passed into obscurity, 'Topsy' survived. She was blissfully ignorant of any ancestors, but she has given us a fearful progeny. With her, popular dramatic interest in the Negro changed from serious moralistic drama to the comic phase. We cannot say that as yet the public taste has generally recovered from this descent from sentimentalism to grotesque comedy, and from that in turn to farce, mimicry, and sheer burlesque. (155)

Gregory also purports that Black theatre in the early 1920s was still suffering from the effect of minstrelsy and that it "reeks with this pernicious influence" (155). The ideal "Negro Theatre," in his assessment, would place all aspects of theatrical production in the hands of Blacks and would

warrant reverence from the American people (159). Its focus would be on representing the real lives of African Americans (159).

Although some used theatre, the performative means used by New Negro proponents to move away from minstrel images, and in which children especially took part, was the pageant. Capshaw Smith writes extensively about pageantry for African American children during the Harlem Renaissance. [20] She asserts that:

> The Harlem Renaissance arose during the great age of American pageantry (1905-25), a movement linked to the Progressive Era's sense of democratic optimism. During a period marked by massive immigration and urban migration, pageantry unified communities around shared stories of their city or town, presenting in dance, song, pantomime, and verse images that would invest the audience in the life of their community and enable them to share dreams of a city's progress and reform. ("Constructing" 41)

Unlike plays written for adults during this time period which depicted "despairing mothers unable to protect their children from the violent threat of a racist society," pageants written for child performers and child audiences portrayed Black childhood in a positive light ("Constructing" 40). Children's pageants aimed to show Black children that the Black race had contributed much to the world, even if these contributions had been omitted from history books (40). Furthermore, pageantry offered a vision of the Black child as "intelligent and capable in the

[20]. Despite the title of Krasner's book, only one chapter "'The Pageant Is the Thing': Black Nationalism and *The Star of Ethiopia,*" is devoted to pageantry during the Harlem Renaissance.

face of racist social structures," and reflected a belief that "the 'New Negro' would ultimately arise from the young Negro and that building Black nationhood and a new cultural identity depended on the education of the younger generation" (40).

Capshaw Smith reports that much of African American pageantry for children of this era followed WEB Du Bois's didactic model laid out in "The Drama Among Black Folk" (1916) (41). She quotes his description of his pageant *The Star of Ethiopia* as being intended:

> to teach on the one hand the colored people themselves the meaning of their history and their rich, emotional life through a new theatre, and on the other to reveal the Negro to the white world as a human, feeling thing. (Du Bois qtd. in "Constructing" 41)

These pageants for children took place in the 1920s and 1930s and were put on in churches, schools, and community halls to reach "audiences of various ages, classes, and educations" ("Constructing" 40).

Although the images of Black children in the 19th and 20th centuries were often exaggerated, grotesque caricatures, the New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance began to recuperate these images. For the most part, however, these new positive images of Black children were framed from an assimilationist perspective. The seed has been sown to overturn Topsy's legacy, but this goal would only be partially fulfilled until the end of the Black Arts Movement nearly 50 years later.

Chapter 2

For Young Brothas and Sistahs: The Black Arts Movement's Youth Connection and Supporting Mechanisms for Black Theatre for Youth

"We as Black Nationalists thought that once we got rid of the white people everything would be cool…" (Amiri Baraka lecture, 7 July 2008, Union Theater, Madison, WI).

"By 1967 and early 1968, Black Power had become the dominant ideological concept among a majority of Black youth, and significant portions of the Black working class and middle strata" (Marable 96).

"The rich potential inherent in the visual and performing arts for developing the minority student's understanding of himself and his past and for celebrating his ethnic pride has usually been locked out of the classroom in most innercity schools." (Eddy 403).

In the Harlem Renaissance, which lasted roughly from the early 1920s to early 1940s, artists ventured to present Blacks as fully-realized human beings; the goal was to show the race as equal to whites and as deserving of acceptance into white, mainstream, capitalist society. [21] The plays of the time, especially those aimed at youth, emphasize the idea of "racial uplift" wherein Du Bois's "talented tenth," conceived as the most intelligent and capable Blacks of the race, would serve as inspirational role models for the remaining ninety percent to emulate. Because the intended theatrical audiences were both Black and white, artists designed plays of this period to appeal to both groups. Aesthetically, this resulted in didactic plays which showcased Blacks in an overwhelmingly positive light, working toward racial equality with whites, while speaking Standard American English instead of the caricatured Black dialects portrayed in minstrelsy.

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[21]. Depending on which scholar you ask. There is some debate about when the movement officially began and when it ended.

Mbowa argues that BAM playwrights wanted art accessible to Blacks and accomplished this in part through the use of slang (10). Theatre of the Black Arts Movement used Black American English unapologetically, frequently employing the word "Nigger." Joyce explains the use of this word in the context of mid-1990s United States

> While the Black middle class fights desperately to keep the word ["nigger"]out of their mouths and homes, the poets of the 1960s use the word as a weapon against all those middle-class ideas—social, political, and aesthetic, imposed on the Black community by the American hegemony. (69)

Theatre emerging from BAM had no intention to prove to whites that Blacks were "as good as" them and deserved full entry into the capitalist system; the time's artists aimed much of the theatre productions solely at Black audiences. Rather, the theatre presented to Blacks the often gritty, violent, and racist realities of the urban streets in which many lived, and often the plays encouraged them to reject white culture and integration in favor of Black Nationalism. Throughout this dissertation, I employ this term using David Krasner's definition

> Black Nationalism is the search for, and the establishment of, an identity in a society that has always viewed African Americans and their achievements as minimal at best. This nationalism attempts to correct this error on the part of the majority of white America by a) recognizing Black achievements in all areas of life; b) establishing organizations that acknowledge Black pride and accomplishment; and c) seeking to identify those achievements as emanating directly from African American people. (86)

Some BAM plays were designed to incite Blacks to physical violence against their perceived oppressors. The Black Theatre Movement had two main purposes according to Williams: "fomenting rebellion against suppression of the autonomous urge of Black people(s) to define and affirm concepts of existence, essence, and experience as they relate to the reality of being Black," and "elevation of Black 'Consciousness'" and subsequent "eradication of the negative Black image created by racist-oriented literature and media through the creation of a new, more positive Black image" (16-17).

Although much has been written about BAM generally, this chapter will deepen the discourse by examining the place of Black children and youth within the Black Arts Movement and within the greater historical context of 1965-1980. In order to do that, BAM's formation and aesthetics are explored. Next, I examine the organizations and ideologies which laid BAM's foundation and analyze Black children's place within these movements and ideologies. The manifestation of BAM ideologies and aesthetics in theatre for adults is addressed.[22] BAM proponents Sonia Sanchez's and Nikki Giovanni's ideas concerning children and creation of cultural products for children are then examined. Finally, I briefly present the government interventions and societal mechanisms, coming from within and outside of Black communities, which helped birth Black Theatre for Youth of this era.

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[22]. Many extant studies cover BAM and Black theatre as a part of the movement in relation to adult participation and representation (See Smethurst, Mance Williams, and others).

While impossible to pinpoint the exact moment of its commencement, the Black Arts Movement began around 1965. Many cite Amiri Baraka's (LeRoi Jones) move from Manhattan's Lower East Side north to Harlem and his subsequent establishment of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS) as the beginning of BAM. This move was significant because Baraka was very prolific during the early 1960s, having become well-known for his publishing, poetry, music criticism, and 1964 controversial Obie-award winning play *Dutchman* (ya Salaam). Also significant was Jones's decision that BARTS would refuse to allow entry to white patrons (Mbowa 6). From the start of the movement, BAM and Black politics were intrinsically tied to one another: the assassination of Malcolm X on February 21, 1965 prompted Baraka's March 1965 move. Bailey writes, "Baraka's stated aim was to use the dramatic arts as a weapon in the struggle for Black liberation from the devastating effects of racism" (19). With the death of Malcolm X, Baraka broke ties with his white Beatnik world, which included divorcing his white wife Hettie Cohen.

BAM emerged at the same time as the struggle for African-American equality experienced a schism: the Civil Rights Movement split between those who continued to advocate in Martin Luther King Jr.'s footsteps for nonviolent, civil disobedience, and those who favored Malcolm X's "by any means necessary" approach.[23] Religion also played a part in the split as Black Christian churches were at the forefront of the movement in the South whereas the Nation of Islam heavily influenced the movement in the North. Also, Southern Blacks continued to favor a "turn the other cheek" approach and organize around the ideas of integration and non-

[23]. Marable notes that in April 1964, Malcolm X began to urge activists "to start rifle clubs to defend the Black community against police brutality and white vigilante violence" (90).

violent protest, but in the North a separatist stance combined with unarmed (and later armed) self-defense were the favored means. The birth of the Black Liberation Movement had begun and the struggle for Black civil rights would never again experience its prior unity and would, in fact, fracture repeatedly under the Black Nationalist organizations which came to dominate the new movement. [24]

Despite the tendentious nature of these different approaches, the idea of being part of the African race worked, at least for a time, to unite American Blacks. Afrocentricity, or the viewing of the world from the perspective(s) of Africa and Africans as the norm and Western culture as outlying and non-normative, began to permeate African American culture in the 1960s. Mbowa elaborates the link between Afrocentricity and the intended destruction of white cultural hegemony: “Afrocentricity suggests an undoing of the internalized oppression of dislocated Africans, as well as Africans within Africa. With the theory, a Black person no longer blindly prefaces white cultural products over African ones” (7). Afrocentricity as practiced in the U.S. included a reverence for Black American history, people, and culture which had historically been ignored, maligned, or negated in mainstream culture. Thus, not only Africa and “African-ness” became valued in American Afrocentricity, but a certain cultural capital was associated with the “Blackness” of Black Americans. Sociologists Omi and Winant write about how the focus on “Blackness” manifested politically as they quote Aldolph L. Reed, Jr:

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[24]. As Omi and Winant write, “In the nation-based paradigm, racial dynamics are understood as products of colonialism and, therefore, as outcomes of relationships which are global and epochal in character…” (37).

> The intellectual climate which came to pervade the movement was best summarized in the nationalists' exhortation to "think Black"…Truth became a feature of the speaker's "Blackness," i.e., validity claims were to be resolved not through discourse but by the claimant's manipulation of certain banal symbols of legitimacy. (41)

The Afrocentrism of BAM located Blackness, Black people, orality, and modes of speech as central to art and in so doing rejected the Eurocentrism upon which the movement's proponents felt all art in the U.S. was based and judged. The resulting aesthetic supposed that the individuality of the Black community at large and of the BAM artists themselves would be exchanged in favor of "the good of the Black collective" (Hood 47). Joyce Ann Joyce explains that in the 1960s, the Black poets created previously unexplored aesthetic principles, wherein the "...goal was the spiritual, cultural, [and] political awakening of the common man as well as the artist" ("Ijala" 90). Mance Williams finds that despite the fact that the idea of a Black Aesthetic came from the Black poets of the 1960s, the aesthetic's characteristics were linked to "oral and musical (blues forms and Be Bop) elements traditional to Black culture" (17). Laretta Henderson notes that BAM "moves toward educating the African American community to its collective and differing histories; reflects the community and its culture and concerns, and addresses their social, spiritual, and physical needs" (301).

Neal's 1968 treatise "The Black Arts Movement," commissioned by playwright Ed Bullins for the Black Theatre issue of *TDR*, offers glowing praise and description of Baraka's poetry and select plays. Yet, Neal's essay does little else to effectively encapsulate the tenets of BAM. The short essay alludes to aesthetic components of BAM but relies more on describing the

aesthetics it rejects than giving space to those it embraces. For example, Neal argues for a complete rejection and redesign of the Western cultural aesthetic, which was meant to include “a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology” (55). However, Neal fails to specify what each of these tenets of BAM would look like and how they might manifest. Instead, Neal relies on vague phrases like the need for Blacks to “define the world in their own terms” and argues for an aesthetic based in African American culture including the “usable elements of Third World culture” (55).

The elements Neal imagined would be found in African American culture and which elements could be mined from Third World culture are left up to his reader to define. Despite these vagaries, Neal communicates some basic tenets of BAM, including: 1) the fusion of all art with politics, i.e. no more ‘art for art’s sake,’ 2) no longer shall whites be the intended audience for Black artists and their art, and 3) Black artists should ascribe to communitarian values and reject the “individual” as conceived by Western society.

Many in the Black Arts Movement ascribed to Pan-Africanism, a concept related to Afrocentrism but distinct from it. Pan-Africanism is different from Afrocentrism in that its focus is on the unity of all Black peoples within and outside of Africa, whereas Afrocentrism implies an ordering of one’s point of view to place Africa and African-ness as the framework from which one sees the world. Omi and Winant explain how the Pan-African worldview worked to unify Blacks through its nearly-universal appeal:

> The power of the Pan-African perspective remains its ability to link the specific forms of oppression which Blacks face in various societies with the colonialist

> exploitation and underdevelopment of Africa. The impact this theoretical current had in the U.S. stemmed from its argument that Black identity conferred membership in a single worldwide Black "nation"—the African diaspora itself. (39)

There is some debate about Pan-Africanism's definition regarding whether it is defined from a Eurocentric or an Afrocentric perspective. Kwame Nantambu argues against the Eurocentric definition which he sees as implying Blacks' struggle against exploitation, domination, and oppression by Europeans (568). He takes umbrage with this view because it denies the unity he believed existed among people of African ethnic origin "to be able to resist foreign aggression and invasion" as early as 3200 B.C., defined by Nantambu as Pan-African Nationalism (568). Nantambu believes the 20th C. to be the fourth major historical time period in which Pan-African Nationalism manifested, including the Black Arts Movement era (570). He defines Cultural Pan-African nationalists as those

> …individuals whose works (a) focus on Negritude, the 'African personality,' and culture as tools of liberation; (b) challenge and expose existing, oppressive Eurocentric social norms and status quo; and (c) seek to return/relocate African people to their original cultural heritage. (570)

By this definition, individuals who ascribed to the Black Aesthetic as defined by Neal and evidenced in their theatrical work are also Cultural Pan-African nationalists.

During BAM, playwrights and Black revolutionary politics often intertwined. Although the roots of the Black Panther Party (BPP) lie with the Revolutionary Action Movement

described below, the BPP functioned as the primary political group which influenced the people who would become major players in the Black Arts Movement. Ed Bullins, one of BAM's most prolific playwrights at one point held the position of Minister of Culture for the Black Panthers (Mbowa 33). Neal, a playwright, intellectual, and critic of BAM worked as the Black Panthers' Educational Director (Hatch, "From Hansberry" 428). In 1967 Baraka met with Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver along with other founding members of the BPP (ya Salaam). The Party concerned itself with Black children's education; one of its demands of the U.S. government listed in its Ten-Point Program from 1966 is quality, relevant education for Blacks (Marable 109). Furthermore, the BPP initiated a free breakfast program to Black schoolchildren in 1969 in California which spread to every BPP branch in the U.S.; many years later, this program which had been feared as a threat by FBI head J. Edgar Hoover became a model for the U.S. government's free breakfast program ("Rise").

In addition to the cultural trends of Afrocentrism and Pan-Africanism which influenced BAM, in regard to political influences besides the BPP, Kaluma ya Salaam identifies three political roots of BAM's ideological development: 1) the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) which had many members in New York City and in which BAM contributors Askia Touré and Larry Neal took part, 2) the US organization led by Maulena Karenga, and 3) the Nation of Islam based in Chicago and led by Elijah Muhammed. [25],[26] All three organizations

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[25]. The "US" organization is not an acronym; Karenga named the group as "US" to feature Blacks as the "in-group" as opposed to whites as "them." See footnote 9 on page 16 for detailed explanation.

involved work with children and/or youth. As Mike Sell describes BAM as a movement which "valued highly" children's plays and organized several theatres exclusively for children (*Avant-Garde Performance* 250), it is clear that this investment in children and children's culture carried over, at least in part, from the ideological influence of these political groups.

Revolutionary Action Movement or RAM was the parent organization to the Black Panther Party and BAM leaders Baraka and Sonia Sanchez were heavily influenced by this organization. Max Stanford, a student militant under Malcolm X's tutelage, founded RAM in 1962 along with other students (Stanford 77). The organization focused on ideas of radical Black Nationalism and three main tenets: 1) armed self-defense, 2) Malcolm X's ideas regarding Black self-determination, and 3) Marx-influenced revolutionary philosophy (Bracey, Jr. and Harley).

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[26]. Karenga founded Kwaanza in 1966 as an African American alternative to Christmas which, at the time, he considered a holiday of the white oppressors. Warren provides a lengthy but worthwhile definition of Kwaanza: "Kwanzaa is adopted and adapted from traditional African harvest festivals. The word itself translates from the Kiswahili as 'first fruits.' Kwanzaa is a celebration of Blackness, a time set aside (December 26-January 1) to review and commit to memory the principles of the Nguzo Saba [defined on page 56]. It offers a Pan-African, non-materialistic holiday or holy days. It is spiritual, celebrating as it does aspects of African cultural values and giving attention to the ancestors, yet it is non-religious. Its acceptability to the masses of Black people in the United States owes mostly to its flexibility. The people can adapt it to their life styles. Many people choose Kwanzaa as an alternative to Christmas while others elect to celebrate both. Another reason for the popularity and spread of Kwanzaa is deeply rooted in the Black folk experience and love for holidays and celebrations" (25).

Conceived originally as an underground movement, the purpose of RAM was the construction of "a revolutionary cadre of dispossessed urban ghetto dwellers" (Bracey, Jr. and Harley). In "Orientation of a Black Mass Movement," a 1962 paper distributed to the Black left in Philadelphia, Stanford explained the importance of youth to the movement that would become RAM:

> Organizers must be people who can help masses win victories around their immediate problems. Organizing should be centered around Black youth with the objective of building a permanent organized structure….the organizing of the Black working class youth should be the primary concern for the Black revolutionist because the Black working class has the substained [sic] resentment, wrath and frustration toward the present social order, that if properly channeled can revolutionize Black America and make Black America, the vanguard of the world's Black revolution. <u>Within the Black working class, the youth constitute the most militant and radical element</u>. Therefore, effective mobilization and channeling of their energies will function as the catalyst for greater militancy among African Americans. (original emphasis, qtd. in Stanford 82)

In order to bring forth their revolution, members of RAM infiltrated civil rights organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and urged their members toward Marxism and revolutionary Black Nationalism and against MLK Jr.'s "conciliatory philosophy" and the hierarchy of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Bracey, Jr. and Harley). From its beginning RAM recruited students, "ghetto youths," and others living in urban communities

(Bracey, Jr. and Harley). Stanford created the first chapter of the Black Panther Party in New York City before Huey P. Newton founded his chapter in Oakland, CA (Bracey, Jr. and Harley). RAM members helped spread the Black Panther Party throughout the United States, but eventually the two organizations severed ties because RAM argued for secrecy while the Panthers desired public recognition (Bracey, Jr. and Harley).[27] Stanford and other RAM members were arrested in 1967, charged with an assassination plot against more mainstream civil rights leaders. The organization disbanded in 1968 with Stanford's advice that all members go underground (Bracey, Jr. and Harley).

Marable writes that Maulana (Ron) Karenga was "viewed as the pivotal advocate of Black cultural nationalism…influential as a social and political critic beyond his own circles (254). Karenga organized his US organization on Kawaida, his beliefs about the "theory and practice of liberation" (Karenga 126). ya Salaam describes Kawaida as "a multifaceted, categorized activist philosophy." Karenga created Kawaida

> to be an ongoing contribution to the development of a critical theory of cultural and social change….the two-fold thrust of Kawaida as critical theory has been

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[27]. Bracey, Jr. and Harley write, "While both groups targeted dispossessed urban ghetto dwellers, RAM disagreed with the Panther's penchant for public posturing and insisted that it was necessary to function as an underground, secret organization" (n. pag.). Stanford ties going underground to safety issues; he insists that RAM members wanted to organize in underground cells because riots in which RAM participated had become increasingly violent as of 1963 and the group wanted to avoid "getting innocent people hurt" (89).

> and remains: 1) to offer a continuous uncompromising criticism of the established order of things; and 2) to pose correctives based on the possibilities inherent in us [Blacks] as a people and in the social situations in which we find ourselves. (Karenga qtd. in Rabaka 149).

Kawaida's seven principles, Nguzo Saba, were considered to be an

> authentic, normative Afro-American system of values. They include Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Unima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Nia (purpose), Kuumba (creativity), and Imani (faith). (Watts 314)

Karenga claims that those who follow Kawaida to be the "spiritual and theoretical heirs of [Marcus] Garvey and Malcolm [X]" (126).

Like RAM, the US organization too experienced a rift between its members and the Black Panther Party, which later became extremely violent. The divisiveness which existed between the two groups created a huge problem for the image of the US organization and contributed to the fracture the Black Liberation Movement as a whole. Cultural Nationalism, the main tenet of US, became discredited by the Panther leaders and thus US lost community and public support as the support shifted to the Panthers.

Karenga believed that the Black Panthers organization was formed, in part, to "serve as a counterweight to the nationalist youth movement, most forcefully and effectively exemplified in

the disciplined and ideologically oriented Simba Wachanga (the Young Lions)…" (129).[28] The name of Patrice Lumumba's Zaire soldiers as "Simba" influenced Karenga to name his group (Hill, Jr. 11). The group flourished in the late sixties through early seventies under the Congress of African People. The US Simba Wachanga (Young Lions) program served to educate young Blacks about African American culture and history, while the Black Panthers gathered youth together for a very different purpose: in Karenga's opinion, the Black Panther Party advocated "the gun as a kind of political god" (133). What remains unclear is the extent to which US work with "youth" referred to pre-college, primary, or secondary school students. The US organization focused on boys and young men in their work with youth. Baraka heavily influenced Ron Karenga's Seven Principles of Blackness and other cultural theories (Hill, Jr.). In turn, the seven principles influenced Karenga's creation of the Simba Wachenga. The formation of this group contributed to how Black male children were conceived of during the Black Arts Movement, and consequently this cultural construction made its way into theatrical productions with and for Black children, as will be seen in the following chapters and especially in Chapter 5 with the exploration of Baraka's Spirit House youth productions.

The Nation of Islam is another group which influenced the direction of the Black Arts Movement and focused on youth. Nation of Islam adherents profess that Allah was personified in its founder, Wallace D. Fard. Fard founded the organization in Detroit, Michigan in 1930. According to Stanford, the "Nation" advocated racial separation, the creation of a Southern Black nation, and the practice of unarmed self-defense (45). An additional tenet of the group is a

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[28]. According to Paul Hill Jr., Karenga's Simba Wachanga organization ran under the auspices of the Congress of African People and began in the late 1960s and ended in the 1970s (11).

belief in capitalism developed “along racial lines” (Marable 56). In only two years, Fard’s organization gathered 8,000 members and had founded University of Islam alternative elementary and secondary schools (Stanford 45; Bush 390). According to Bush,

> The basis for these institutions [University of Islam in Detroit and Chicago] was to teach African Americans to know self, love self, and do for self. From the 1930s until 1960, the University of Islam was virtually alone in providing African American children with instruction and guidance that stressed self-knowledge, self-reliance, and self-discipline. (qtd. in Bush 390)

Among other subjects, the schools taught children math, astronomy, and “general knowledge of ending spook [white] civilization” (qtd. in Clegg 29). After WWII, Elijah Muhammad assumed leadership and the Nation had relocated to Chicago (Stanford 45). During the early 1940s, Muhammad observed that Black churches and other Black organizations had neglected to recruit “the most oppressed members of their race,” namely convicts, drug addicts, pimps, prostitutes, young delinquents, and the chronically unemployed (Marable 56). Sensing an opportunity for the Nation, Muhammad devoted his organization’s efforts toward attracting and reforming this group. By the 1960s, the group numbered between 65,000 and 100,000 nationally; more than 75 percent of its members were between the ages of 17 and 35 (Marable 56). In part the “ghetto youth” were drawn in by the educational and social programs aimed at them (56). Much of the lives of the reformed believers, who abstained from alcohol, tobacco, dancing, swearing, and fornication centered around their respective Temples (Clegg 100-101). Clegg explains

> [In Chicago] Since believers were discouraged from fraternizing with non-members, 'socialization' usually centered around Unity Night (Tuesdays) at Shabazz restaurant or group study sessions in the homes of laborers, where hours would be spent analyzing the Bible, the Qur'an, or Nation of Islam lessons…. The favorite pastime of most members of the group were the periodic contests held by the University of Islam, which spotlighted the talent that movement was cultivating among the young. (101) [29]

All Muslims attended mandatory meetings on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays; female members also went to nursing class on Tuesdays and on Thursdays a "culture and civilization" class (Clegg 101).

As is clear from the above examination of the three influential organizations which led to BAM's approach to and engagement with culture and politics, RAM, US, and the Nation each included children or youth in their programming. This interest probably stemmed from at least two complementary aspirations. On the one hand, the organizations displayed an earnest desire to improve social conditions and educational opportunities for young Blacks. On the other, each organization felt a need to indoctrinate young people with its respective dogma, predicated on

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[29]. Shabazz restaurant was created in July 1947 by Nation of Islam members in Chicago and staffed and run by Muslims (Clegg 99). Clegg writes that although the restaurant and its accompanying bakery and grocery store were not major organizations, "they were still heralded as examples of what Blacks could do for themselves without having 'to demand [anything of] the devil or resort to him'" (99).

the underlying assumption that "children are our future," i.e. without younger people to sustain them, the organizations would eventually cease to operate. To tie these ideas to art and theatre programming with youth, in a 1969 report "Neighborhoods and the Performing Arts," Alvin Reiss writes that performing arts groups in ghetto areas "recognize that vested within the young are the hopes for the neighborhood and the hopes for preserving its culture" (qtd. in Eddy 403).

Neal's second tenet in defining the Black Aesthetic, that Black artists should cease directing their art at white audiences, held credence for two major Black playwrights of the era, Baraka and Bullins. Fittingly, these were the two artists most involved with the Black Panthers and both, at least for a time in Baraka's case, advocated Black separatism. Much like Baraka's refusal to let whites into BART/S, Bullins's complete rejection of whites and any possibility of their assistance in the struggle for Black liberation is demonstrated in the content of the 1970 London production of his play *It Bees Dat Way*. Mbowa reports that Bullins attempted to convey a sense of danger and hostility toward whites in this play, to the extent that liberal whites who wanted to see a "Black play" would "…never desire to see a Black play again in their lives" (38).

Baraka, as previously stated, served as one of the most influential artists of BAM. His playwriting, in particular, helped developed techniques of a new Black dramaturgy and the writings of Antonin Artaud influenced his concept of revolutionary theatre, whether or not Baraka chose to admit this Western European influence (Williams 21-22). In a videotaped interview in *Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement*, Baraka stated:

> We wanted our art to more and more reflect the Black Liberation Movement itself and say the things that the Black Liberation Movement was doing, but you see,

> the way things were going in the U.S. [United States], you could actually perceive that the stuff was getting ready to get like that…self-defense was starting to be impressed on peoples' minds. (King, Jr.)

Although no prior scholarship has elucidated this connection, from its start the Black Theatre arm of the Black Arts Movement linked theatre with youth and it was this very association which led to the first "Black Arts" theatre's downfall. The 1965 manifestation of Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School (BART/S) was the first "Black Arts" theatre and it received start-up funds of $40,000 from the United States government Office of Economic Opportunity, "which had just started its antipoverty programs for ghetto youth" (Fabre 19). BART/S only existed for a period of seven months, but during its short tenure it received so much criticism in the (white) press that the government retracted its funding with the claim that Baraka had been using the theatre to "corrupt minors" with racist (anti-white) plays containing "foul language" (Fabre 20-21). It was not only white reviewers and government officials who rejected Baraka's theatre, however. As Fabre writes, "Jones's [Baraka's] vehement attacks on whites, especially liberals whom he once had considered allies, led both whites and Blacks to disown him and to dub his theatre a 'theatre of hatred'" (20). One example of the hatred espoused by Baraka in his plays is shown in a play direction written in his *Experimental Death Unit #1* (1965):

> …a group of long-haired bearded Negro youths marches out with drums and marching cadence, though they look weary and full of combat. At the front of the group one boy marches with a pike on the top of which is a white man's head still dripping blood. They stop in front of the dead boy's body. (Baraka qtd. in Mbowa 28)

Although many of those who created art during BAM were men who directed their works at adults, two of BAM's most active women writers Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni, valued Black children's culture of the time to the extent that they aimed some of their work at them. Sanchez believed that Black children's education through their exposure to and participation in artistic works that adhered to the Black Aesthetic was essential to the future of the race. Not only did she write *Malcolm/Man,* a six-page play for young audiences to be performed by children themselves for a young audience, she also wrote her third book of poetry titled *It's a New Day*, subtitled "poems for young brothas and sistuhs" for young readers (Joyce, *Ijala* 65).[30] Joyce reported that through this volume of poetry, Sanchez, "...teaches Black children to love themselves, to be proud of their African heritage" (*Ijala* 65-66). Sanchez had converted to the Nation of Islam before she wrote this book of poetry (Joyce 79). Furthermore, Joyce adds that Sanchez

> ...realizes that reinforcement is the most effective method of teaching. Thus, if young Blacks learn to love themselves and respect their African heritage and if they are taught early to recognize and shun the psychologically crippling elements of American culture, they will be strong adult Black men and women. (*Ijala* 80)

Children, according to Joyce, were a central focus of Sanchez's canon (65). Joyce notes how Sanchez uses children as objects to fulfill her goal: "For our children represent *us*. If we look into

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[30]. Sanchez wrote another book for young people, *A Sound Investment: Short Stories for Young Readers*, which was published by Third World Press in 1980.

their eyes we see ourselves. They are the *objects* that serve as the medium through which Sanchez guides Black people" (original emphasis 65-66).

Sanchez's interest in creating art for young people was not limited to *It's a New Day* and *Malcolm/Man*, for before she had become known as a BAM playwright and before she had ever written a play for adults, she wrote a Theatre for Youth play called *A Trip to a Backwoods Farm* (Wood 122). Interestingly, in a 2001 interview with Jacqueline Wood focused on her playwriting, Sanchez only mentions this play and *Malcolm/Man* in passing and although she describes her plays for adults extensively, she does not provide much information about her plays for young audiences. About *Malcolm/Man*, she only states that the original production took place in Pittsburgh and was the second play she wrote during BAM (Wood 122, 123).

In *Malcolm/Man*, Sanchez conceived of the Black child as an agent of social change with the power to inspire others to follow the child's lead. By using the powerful images of children portraying the life of Malcolm X and using the language of the community to which the play was addressed, Sanchez appealed to a Black community in transition and urged them to become their own leaders and "blk/people worshippers." Mike Sell's assessment of *Malcolm/Man* as "sever[ing] the links among individualism, heroism, and the monumentality of history" suggests that this play for Black children aligned with the BAM concepts as described by Neal ("The Black Arts" 71). Sell also finds that Sanchez's play works against the Western aesthetic concepts of the "untainted hero, the resolved crisis, and phallocentrism" (71).

Nikki Giovanni also directed work toward child audiences. Her 1973 collection of poems for young people *Ego-tripping* showcases her involvement in the Black Arts Movement and her

concurrent view that the participation of children and young people were an integral part of the movement for Black Liberation. George Ford's illustrations bring Giovanni's poems to life by portraying Black children and young people actively engaged in their surroundings in positive ways and reflect the Afrocentrism of the time. For example, the book's copyright page contains an image of a Black boy dressed in Western garb with his arms outstretched; his shadow is an outline of the African continent (Giovanni *Ego-tripping*). On the continent a face resembling an African mask appears, seeming to communicate that the small boy has Africa inside of him. Two of Giovanni's poems in the book, "ego-tripping" and "poem for flora," display Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism in that "ego-tripping" celebrates the Black connection to the Congo, Egypt, Islam, and Christianity, while in "poem" a little Black girl who has "short straightened hair" envisions rejecting Western (white) standards of attractiveness to be like Sheba "Black and comely" (Giovanni *Ego-tripping*, 9). However, Giovanni's Afrocentrism is not merely celebratory; several of her poems critique white society and advocate a violent stance in the fight for Black Liberation. For example, in her 1967 "poem for Black boys" she emphasizes Black masculinity with a rejection of presumed homosexuality by telling boys to identify with Indians [sic] when they play Cowboys and Indians, rather than "the big bad sheriff on his faggoty white horse" (*Ego-tripping* 11). She further argues that boys should play games that are relevant to their history, such as "run-away-slave or Mau Mau" (Giovanni, *Ego-tripping* 11). In a plea for Black boys to take up arms and reject nonviolence she urges them to ask their mothers for a "Rap Brown gun" and directly states "DO NOT SIT IN DO NOT FOLLOW KING GO DIRECTLY TO STREETS" (Giovanni, *Ego-tripping* 11).[31] Furthermore, the poet advocates violence as a

[31]. H. Rap Brown served as the Black Panthers Minister of Justice during the 1960s. According

game and proposes marketing riot kits to children (12). Her response to attacks on Black protestors by police during riots is "Then our old friend Hide and Seek becomes valued, Because we have much to seek and ourselves to hide from a lecherous dog" (Giovanni, *Ego-tripping* 12). In perhaps the most telling lines of the poem Giovanni shows her readers the extent to which she feels Black children are an invaluable part of Black Liberation: she calls them "children of battle" who "must invent your own games and teach us old ones how to play" (*Ego-tripping* 12). Giovanni seems to see violence as a necessity but not one she has come to easily; in her poem about the funeral of Martine Luther King, Jr., written five days after his assassination on April 4, 1968, she speaks of seeking the creation of world the MLK Jr. could have survived while he preached non-violence (*Ego-tripping* 22).

Another book of pictures and poetry for young people by Giovanni, *Spin a Soft Black Song*, came out in 1971 and according to its introduction was aimed at children "from five weeks to ten years" of age (Giovanni, *Spin* n.p.). Giovanni stated that she and the illustrator Charles Bible decided to write an illustrated poetry book for children because few books for children, especially for Black children, existed when they were young (*Spin* n. pag.). Poetry in the book includes themes such as relationships within Black families, children's friendships, and urban life. The language takes the form of that which is contemporarily considered "appropriate" for children and the book refrains from criticizing whites or mainstream culture. Afrocentric in style, Giovanni wrote the poems in a Black dialect and institutions of import to Blacks, such as the Black Church and neighborhood barber shop, receive emphasis. Significant Black figures, such

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to Earl Ofari Hutchinson, during this time period Brown "…repeatedly called on blacks to kill the police and to burn down America's cities" (n. pag.).

as H. Rap Brown and the Jackson 5 are referenced as well. Giovanni references Black Power and the Black Liberation Movement in “some things are funny like that” [sic]. In this poem, a Black man asks a Black boy his affiliation and tells the boy that the playground is for Black children (Giovanni, *Spin* n. pag.). When the child responds that he is Black, the adult questions the child about how he knows he is Black; here Giovanni demonstrates how the Black Power movement affected Black children’s lives, even on the playground. The reality of urban life for children is presented in “mommies do” [sic] wherein a young girl asks her mother why when the mother leaves for work in the summer she must stay inside and isn’t allowed to play “ball and rope and scaley and break bottles and run and jump and laugh” with the other children (Giovanni, *Spin* n. pag.). The mother responds that the child is not allowed to do these things because she loves her; the implication being that the urban streets were a very unsafe place for Black children to play. Although in some ways the book essentializes the experience of Black children, Giovanni’s poetry coupled with the illustrations most likely worked to validate the lived experiences of many Black children who, during this era, experienced a dearth in children’s literature directed at them.

At the same time as adherents to the Black Arts Movement and the political organizations which preceded it argued for better educational and cultural opportunities for Black children and youth, white Americans began to become aware of the realities of the urban ghettos through television news programs’ coverage of race riots occurring in many major U.S. cities. Marable writes about the cost the violence had on the U.S.:

> Combining the total weight of socioeconomic destruction, the ghetto rebellions from 1964-1972 led to 250 deaths, 10,000 serious injuries, and 60,000 arrests, at a

> cost of police, troops, other coercive measures taken by the state [the United States government]and losses to business amounting to billions of dollars. (93)

This level of violence could not continue unchecked and so the U.S. government chose the unusual route of funding community youth arts programming to prevent violence (Hager 84). Hatch explains this decision: “Politicians and government officials liked it [street theatre] for its potential to defuse rebellion through arts, music, dance and language, instead of fire” (417). Theatre for Youth scholar Lori Hager details that Vice-President Hubert Humphrey originated the idea of starting a summer arts program in inner cities to aide in “combat[ting] violence” in summer of 1968; the program focused on the 16 U.S. cities deemed “most likely to erupt in violence” and awarded $25,000 grants to provide arts programming to “at risk” young people (84). In late spring of 1968, the National Endowment for the Arts gave these grants to cities with the understanding that each city would match funds two-to-one (Eddy 399). Although initially conceived as an attempt to provide white, middle-class cultural opportunities to so-called deprived nonwhite youth, in New York at least, the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) had the wherewithal to recognize the racism and indignity in this approach. Instead, NYSCA began to invest “in support of arts groups and activities established and run by ghetto artist-leaders themselves” and also pushed for year-round programming for the youth demographic whenever possible (Eddy 401). In fact, NYSCA had already demonstrated interest in using the arts to improve life in ghetto communities as early as 1967 when it spent $300,000 of its $1.5 million budget to “investigate how the arts could help illuminate some of the frustrations of the ghetto” (Eddy 402). Eddy quotes John B. Hightower in the NYSCA 1967-

1968 Annual Report explaining the two basic ideas of using arts in economically-deprived neighborhoods:

> The first [idea] was simply that any program developed was not going to be a hit-and-run cosmetic; an arts event had to be more than a performing group assigned to Harlem only to return downtown after the show ended. Secondly we wanted to find out what the ghetto community wanted rather than what we, as an outside agency, decided it should have. (Hightower in Eddy 402)

The organization found commonalities among the "ghetto arts groups," such as being newly created in store-fronts or coffeehouses or functioning out of churches, settlement houses and antipoverty organizations; some received temporary sponsorship from museums, universities, and schools (Eddy 402). The arts groups also "engaged in vigorous and often controversial arts activities: the visual and graphic arts, ethnic dance and music, improvisational drama and protest theatre, and experiments in film-making and mixed media" (402). Many of the programs studied emphasized professionalism in attitude and product and sustained both a professional company along with offering training and workshops aimed at youth in the neighborhood; as will be seen in the following chapters, AMAS Repertory Theatre, Harlem Children's Theatre Company, and the National Black Theatre all ascribed to these characteristics (Eddy 402).

Just a few years later in the early 1970s, two New York City-based organizations began to provide both support and acknowledgment of Black Theatre which extended to Black Theatre for Youth. Founded in 1970, the Black Theatre Alliance (BTA) defined itself as a non-profit service organization which was created to form "a united voice for Black Arts organizations as a

means of simplifying existing problems" ("Untitled flyer"). Black theatre and dance companies who were non-profit, tax-exempt and had existed for at least two years were eligible for membership ("Untitled flyer"). Three of the five theatre companies studied in the following chapters held memberships in BTA, including AMAS Repertory Theatre, Billie Holiday Theatre, and the Harlem Children's Theatre Company ("Untitled flyer.") The non-profit BTA served as the first organized support network for Black theatre which came into existence to aide companies in sharing physical and administrative resources (Hatch, "From Hansberry" 405-406). Of the additional resources offered to members, two were publications: a quarterly newsletter and a National Theatre Resource Directory ("Untitled flyer"). The BTA also wrote the "Theatre Notes" sections in several unnamed publications ("Untitled flyer"). In order to increase the group's visibility and gain members, it hosted theatre festivals semi-annually beginning in 1971; although the BTA began with a handful of members, its recruitment techniques were effective and by 1980 the group had grown to 75 companies (Hatch, "From Hansberry" 406). Also by 1979 the group's budget had grown to $468,000; unfortunately half of its funds came from the federal Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA) which was later gutted by Congress and President Reagan (Hatch, "From Hansberry" 406). Before the group dissolved, its financial success had allowed it to move into the Theatre Row building on W.42nd Street; when it lost its funding, BTA's debts totaled $90,000 which included two months of back-rent (Hatch "From Hansberry" 406). [32] Theatre critic A. Peter Bailey expressed his opinion that the group disintegrated due to "a general lack of concern about its survival on the part of most members of

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[32]. This building also housed the Harlem Children's Theatre Company beginning in 1978 (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

the New York City Black theatre community" (21). Nonetheless, during its thirteen year tenure BTA contributed to the Black theatre community, including the Black Theatre for Youth community.

AUDELCO, or the Audience Development Committee, Inc., another organization founded in the New York City Black community which aided Black theatre's development, began in 1973 under Vivian Robinson's leadership (Robinson 79). Robinson had worked as a theatre critic and social reporter for the Black publication *New York Amsterdam News* (Hatch, "From Hansberry" 408). The group started with the goal of sponsoring theatre parties and cultural events and according to a 1978 *New York Times* article, was "created to stimulate interest in the arts in Black communities" ("Audelco Honors"). AUDELCO served several functions: it offered vouchers from the Theatre Development Fund in order to offer reduced-price theatre tickets to its members, circulated a monthly newsletter "*Intermission*," published a Black Theatre Annual, held seminars, and created an information hotline (Hatch, "From Hansberry" 408; Bailey 21; Robinson 79).

AUDELCO is best known as an organization that evaluates and awards excellence in Black theatre, designed to honor "meaningful contributions to Black theatre" at the not-for-profit, professional level (Robinson 79). The bestowal of recognition awards began in the organization's first year; Hatch explains AUDELCO's decision to give awards "knowing that the major New York critics rarely recognized Black talent with the Tony or Drama Desk awards" ("From Hansberry" 408). The awards became a goal for theatre companies and for individual artists; they achieved their purpose according to Robinson of signifying "excellence to other artists and to the public" (79). In 1973 the organization gave general awards, but in 1974 it began

to distinguish between categories such as set designer, actress, director, etc. (Robinson 79). In 1975, AUDELCO recognized work according to specific productions (Robinson 79). Although several individuals involved in the Black Theatre for Youth companies, and one company itself, described in the following chapters received AUDELCO awards, the group made no award distinction between excellence in "children's theatre" or "adult theatre." The lack of distinction can be interpreted several ways. One interpretation of the inclusion of TFY could indicate an acceptance of the genre unparalleled in mainstream theatre circles in that contributions to TFY were considered on par with contributions to theatre for adults. Another less optimistic interpretation is that AUDELCO did not imagine that there were enough Black TFY activities in New York City to warrant the creation of a separate awards category. Either way, it is evident that the organization valued Black Theatre for Youth as its Sept./Oct. 1974 newsletter described the reasoning for awarding the Billie Holiday Theatre with its Board of Directors Award: "for its innovations in the very vital area of children's theatre" (AUDELCO 1).

Thus, in this era, several factors led to the inception of theatre companies which focused on Black youth as participants and audience members. Children and youth were integral foci of the three organizations which gave rise to the Black Arts Movement. For BAM proponents, theatre became one of the favored means of artistic expression and polemics; Black Theatre for Youth during BAM seems to have been a "natural" progression, given BAM's focus on theatre and the epoch's concern with and attention toward children and youth. The government and community support offered to Black organizations and arts organizations allowed Black Theatre for Youth to come to fruition in New York City neighborhoods and in Newark, NJ. In the next four chapters, I explore the extent to which the ideas of Black Liberation, Afrocentricity, and

Pan-Africanism, as well as the Black Arts Movement's "Black Aesthetic" influenced these Black Theatre for Youth companies.

Chapter 3

Harlem Children's Theatre Company

"Art cuts across race, for me it did" (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012)

Harlem Children's Theatre Company (HCTC) was a hybrid, meaning that it demonstrated both traditional, mainstream Theatre for Youth practices and some of the aesthetic qualities of the Black Arts Movement. Bailey and Armstead Johnson write that HCTC, along with other Black theatre companies, "follow[ed] the historical pattern of creating theatre by Black people for the principal enjoyment and enlightenment of Black people" (C5C). Like its mainstream counterparts, HCTC is an example of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) as a part of a system of children's culture created primarily by adults, advertised to adults, reviewed by adults, and often purchased by adults. The tone of HCTC production reviews indicates that these reviews were written by and for adults as arbiters of children's culture. For example, in one review the author encourages her adult readers: "If you haven't gone yet, pick up your kids, put on your keds and run to see Babylon II" (D8). One poster included in the Hatch-Billops Collection seems designed to draw in potential adult audiences (See fig. 3.1). That being said, HCTC often had play posters designed which seem geared toward 1970s child viewers (See fig 3.2). The HCTC productions were designed for family audiences of parents bringing children, including very young children as well as teenagers: The theatre's aim was for parents to have as much fun as their children had (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aduke Aremu, one of the company's founders and primary playwright, said that she wrote for the family and that though the content of her plays

"crossed over into adult concepts," the use of spectacle made the plays appealing to children as young as five years old (22 Jan. 2012).

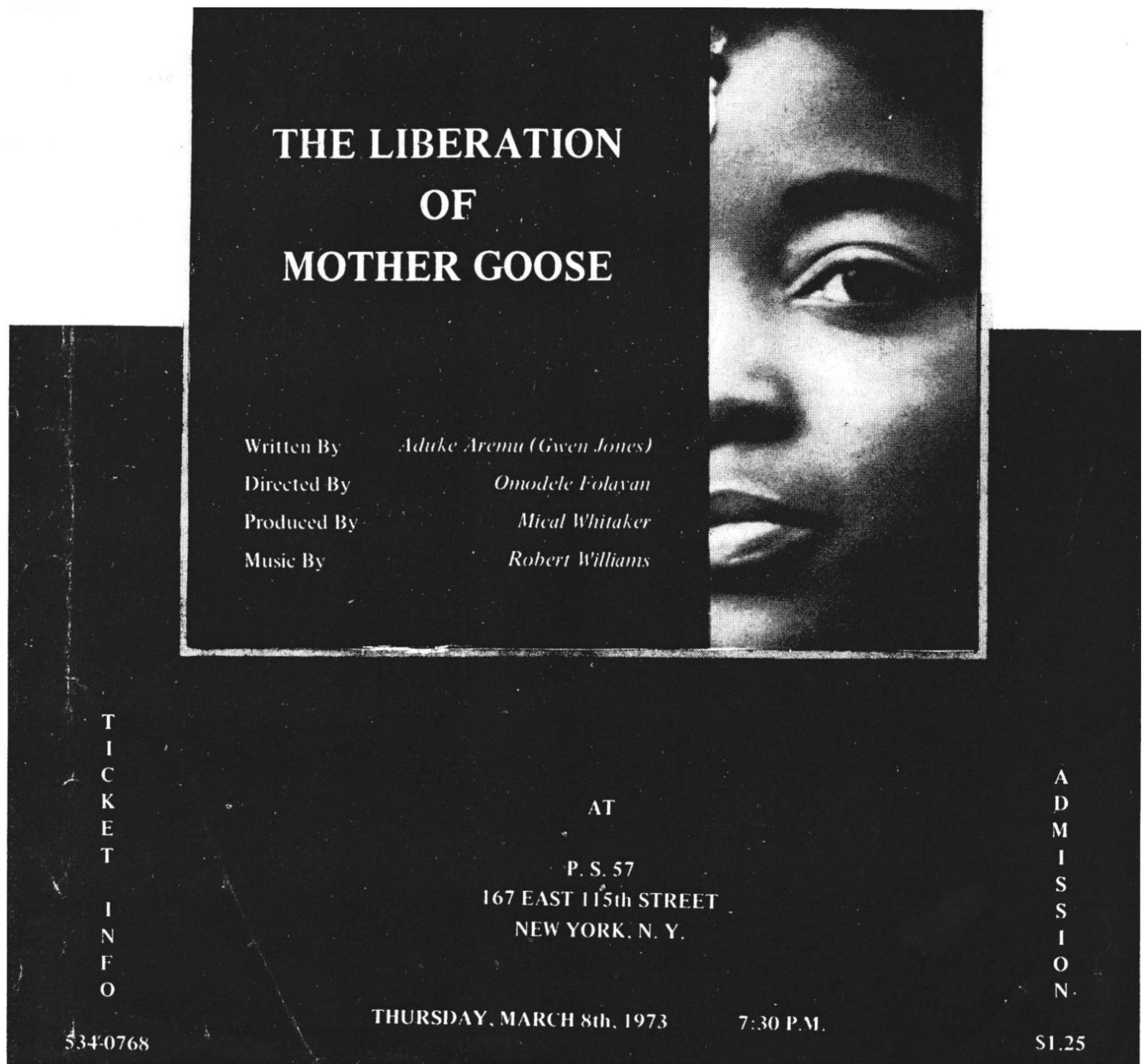

Fig. 3.1. Poster advertising production of *The Liberation of Mother Goose* in 1973 which appears to be aimed at an adult audience. Courtesy of Hatch-Billops Collection, Inc.

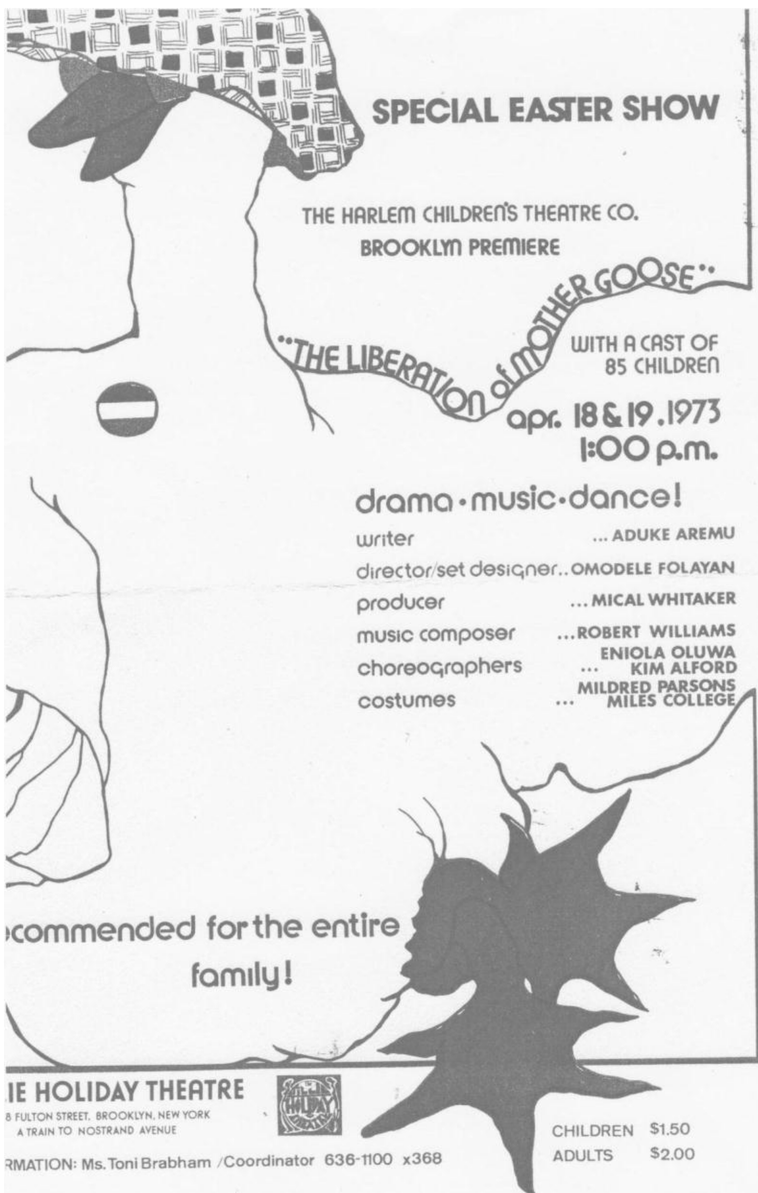

Fig.3.2 Poster advertising production of *The Liberation of Mother Goose* in 1973 staged at the Billie Holiday Theatre. The ad appears to be designed to appeal to children. Courtesy of Hatch-Billops Collection, Inc.

Where HCTC's path seems to veer from that of mainstream TYA of the time is that rather than using adult actors only, HCTC always used child actors to perform in front of child and family audiences. Scores of children acted in each of the company's productions; the cast numbers vary in the reviews from 46 children all the way up to 85, depending on the play (Grimes D8; Gussow "Stage" 23; Spence "Harlem").[33] The extant reviews report the child performers as ranging from four to sixteen years of age, though Aremu reported that the youngest were six years old and the oldest 18 years (Spence "Harlem"; Harlem; Grimes D8; Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).[34]

The founders of HCTC, like the founders of many TFY organizations and companies, were female. Aduke Aremu (née Gwendolyn Anderson) and Omodele Folayani (Myrna Simmons) created The Harlem Children's Theatre Company in 1971 upon their return from a vacation in West Africa (Spence "Harlem"; Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu and Folayani wanted to begin a children's theatre company in the U.S. based on the concepts of "freedom, color, and flair" that they had experienced in West Africa ("Harlem"). More specifically, the pair stated HCTC's purpose: "this new experience for Black children intends to bring to our community a new awareness of Black culture, dance, and history through children's theater" ("Harlem"; "Harlem kids'" D1).

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[33]. Aremu stated in our first interview that all of her plays had a cast of at least 55 children (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

[34]. Gilbert Moses's 5-year-old daughter was a member of the HCTC resident company (Spence, "Harlem" D11).

Aremu's profession was teaching and she continued to teach elementary school throughout her years as the head of HCTC (Aremu 18 July 2012). Aremu said that working with youth interested her for several reasons; in particular because of their vitality onstage, absence of their "talking back," and feeling that "children are the purest form of creative energy on the planet" (Aremu 22 Jan 2012). Aremu's reasoning for working with youth runs contrary to that of many theatre professionals: in her estimation, "It's easier working with children…They're wide open to new ideas and concepts. Adults have a lot more hangups. It's much harder working with them" (Spence, "Harlem" D10). She also admired how children were great risk takers (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

The pair divided the labor such that Folayani, originally from Barbados, worked on costumes, scenery and set design where she "brought her Caribbean concepts to work" while Aremu focused on the artistic vision of the theatre and scriptwriting (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).[35] Early on Aremu and Folayani encountered resistance to their founding of HCTC because theatre professionals in the Harlem area questioned their artistic capacities and qualifications; the pair overcame that stumbling block when they communicated that each of them had earned advanced degrees and had experience working with children ("Harlem").[36] For her part, Aremu majored in Speech, Theatre, and Communications at Hunter College where she also earned a Master of Science degree in Education and Communications; she worked as an elementary school teacher after her college graduation in 1969 (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Spence quotes Aremu (speaking in

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[35]. Folayani and Aremu worked together on HCTC for 15 years: from 1969 to 1984 (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

[36]. No information was available concerning Folayani's educational background.

the vernacular of 1970s Harlem) as believing sexism played a role in the initial resistance they encountered: "…though with some of them, it was just that old female resentment trip" (Aremu qtd. in "Harlem"). It is likely that Aremu and Folayani also experienced skepticism because of their ages: Aremu was 24 years old and just two years out of college when she cofounded HCTC. In hindsight, Aremu realizes how noteworthy her accomplishment was for the time period; in my interview with her she said, "In the early 1970s, women did not do this [found theatre companies immediately following college] and make money" (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

Aremu contended in 1975 that garnering initial support for the company proved quite difficult, yet over time HCTC attracted at least three well-known BAM artists who supported its work: poet and playwright Sonia Sanchez, director and playwright Gilbert Moses, and playwright Joseph Walker ("Sonia Sanchez"; HCTC NYSCA Grant 2; "'Raisin'"A1).[37] [38] [39] Furthermore, HCTC received early support from other theatre companies, such as the East River Players, the Ngoma Dancers and Drummers, and the Brownsville Laboratory Theatre in the form

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[37]. See Chapter 2 for an explanation of Sanchez's focus on Black children in her work and her contributions to the Black Arts Movement. Sanchez did not collaborate with Aremu on artistic productions. She served as mistress of ceremonies at a 1974 event to benefit HCTC held at the Brooklyn Academy of Music ("Sonia Sanchez").

[38]. Gilbert Moses was the director of *Slave Ship, Ain't Suppose to Die a Natural Death*, and *The Taking of Miss Janie*, and assisted HCTC in "artistic development" (Spence "Harlem" D11).

[39]. With his 1974 Tony-Award win for best play (*The River Niger*) Walker was described as taking his place "alongside Lorraine Hainesberry and Imamu Baraka (Leroi Jones) as one of the foremost Black playwrights of the century" ("'Raisin'" A1).

of a benefit concert in 1972 to raise money for the company's second year of productions ("East River" D5). By 2012, Aremu was able to point out to me the importance of the connections she made in sponsorship for HCTC, financial and otherwise, which made all the difference regarding the establishment of such a successful theatre company in a relatively brief span of time. One connection which proved particularly advantageous was Aremu's relationship with Ellis Haizlip who worked at Channel 13 (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).[40] Haizlip provided economic sponsorship of Aremu's work with HCTC and also served as a bridge between Aremu and prominent theatre professionals in New York City: as Aremu describes it, Haizlip made phone calls for her to Joseph Papp and Novella Nelson and other similarly-prominent theatre folk and secured initial interviews for her (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu stated, "Once I got in the door, I always got in," meaning that in the interviews she had the capacity to convince these theatre professionals and companies to work with her and HCTC (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).[41]

Another key component to HCTC's success was the internal company structure. Aremu's "right-hand woman," Dawn Alli, served as administrator of the HCTC from 1974; she was instrumental in grant writing, fund-raising, and securing travel arrangements (Aremu 18 July 2012). The company had a board structure initiated by Aremu: the Board of Directors was racially integrated and included several Black politicians and "white folks who were willing [to serve on it]" (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Fifteen members "from a wide spectrum of experiences"

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[40]. Channel 13, or WNET, was and continues to serve as the major public television station in New York City and its environs.

[41]. According to Aremu, Hazlip also spoke with the New York State Council on the Arts and secured a $25,000 grant for HCTC from the organization (22 Jan. 2012).

comprised the Board and Vivian Bright served as its president (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu credited Bright with securing a Congressional Award for her in Mar. 2010 and as serving as the company's "spiritual and economic mentor" (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu noted that Congressman Ed Towns also served on the Board (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). [42]

The company experienced a solid funding situation, which allowed Aremu to create large budgets for her shows and put up $100,000-$200,000 productions (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). The board members raised over twenty percent of the company's annual income (HCTC NYSCA Grant 4). In addition to the money HCTC received from board member fundraising, private donors also helped sustain the company financially. Three of these donors were Chase Manhattan, Bankers Trust, and the Daily News Foundation (HCTC NYSCA Grant 6). HCTC also received NEA grants and several NYSCA grants (HCTC NYSCA Grant 4, 6). Because she succeeded in being well-funded throughout her theatrical career, Aremu said, "I didn't have to worry about money so I could focus on the artistic aspects [of HCTC]" (22 Jan. 2012).

New York Amsterdam News published many articles about the HCTC, though coverage of the theatre company in other newspapers and scholarly work is scant. Theatre for Youth scholar Nellie McCaslin covers HCTC briefly in *Historical Guide to Children's Theatre in America* and notes that "all racial, ethnic, and economic classes" of New York City were potential audience members or participants in the company (155). McCaslin wrote that HCTC's goal for its young audiences was an aesthetic experience of theatre but that HCTC also contained "a strong social

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[42]. Congressman Towns is the representative who spoke in Congress calling for public recognition of Aremu and her work in Mar. 2010.

consciousness and motivation to perform as well" (155). Much of the information included in this chapter about HCTC is from *Amsterdam News* articles and reviews. Aremu expressed that although the performances of HCTC were taking place throughout New York City, the company was "virtually ignored by the larger theatre community" ("Harlem" D10), leading one to believe that much of the Black theatre community in New York in the early 1970s devalued theatre for youth, not unlike their counterparts in white mainstream theatre.

Aremu and Folayani started what would become HCTC in 1969 as a program at P.S. 57 at 116th Street, a Harlem elementary school, where Black and Puerto Rican students received free training classes in music, art, dance, drama, voice, and the technical aspects of theatre ("Harlem"; Tapley C10). The group received the class space and the basement rehearsal space at no charge (Tapley C10; Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). From the beginning, the main goals of the company were the professional-quality training of young people in the dramatic arts and the creation of fully staged original musicals for which HCTC recruited primarily minority playwrights, music directors, and choreographers (Mitchell 36; HCTC NYSCA Grant 1, 2, 4). [43] Lionel Mitchell writes about the professionalism of the company:

> The fascinating thing here is that it is possible to see quite clearly how these youngsters are being structured for actual professional careers or work. This group is not playing at all and ought to have fuller community and granting support. (Mitchell 36)

[43]. Although I ideologically oppose the usage of this term as a descriptor for human beings, this was the terminology in use in the primary source material from which I drew this information.

Shortly after its founding, Robert Williams came on board as the HCTC music director and he and Aremu collaborated: she wrote scripts for HCTC and he wrote the songs and musical arrangements ("Harlem"). Mical Whitaker, founder of The East River Players and well-reputed director of Black theatre for adults, also entered the picture early and assisted HCTC by directing some shows ("Street"; Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

In a 1977 interview, Aremu expressed her belief that the theatre of HCTC and other arts for Black children should serve the social function of providing Black children with positive alternatives to the surrounding Black youth culture:

> There are enough Black children in this city to warrant having 25 Black Children's theatres. Indeed, if there were that number of theatres and an equal amount of regular radio and television shows and a like number of dance companies, etc., we could dramatically reduce the crime, juvenile delinquency, escapism and educational apathy that is flourishing among New York's youth today. Our children should be seen as masses of energy…they must move…and when they have no place to constructively use this energy, it turns into a self-destructive mechanism. (qtd. in Hazziezah D8)

In this interview, in addition to her assertion that arts participation educates the whole child through what is now often referred to as engagement with multiple intelligences, Aremu indicated that participation in the arts increases a child's "emotional intelligence".[44] [45] Linking

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[44]. The theory of Multiple Intelligences was defined by Howard Gardner in his 1983 book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. In this work, Gardner proposed that

emotional intelligence with theatre and drama became common among drama educators in the late 1990s following the 1995 publication of New York Times science writer and psychologist Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ.*[46] For example, in 1998 Theatre for Youth scholar Johnny Saldaña wrote a manuscript called "A philosophy and rationale for emotional intelligence instruction through drama," a portion of which, Five Goals for Emotional Intelligence Instruction through Drama, Manon van de Water reports had its basis in Peter Solovey's five domains of emotional intelligence (van de Water 6). Accordingly, the five goals include: "1. recognize and monitor own emotions for self-awareness; 2. manage own emotions for positive change; 3. motivate self and exercise self-control for productivity; 4. recognize emotions in and empathize with others; and, 5. Display social competence and interpersonal relationships" (van de Water 6-7). The following statement by Aremu in 1977 put

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every person possesses a variety of types of intelligences, eight to be exact. Included in the eight are spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, bodily- kinesthetic, musical, linguistic, logical-mathematical, and naturalistic.

[45]. According to Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer, co-authors of the first publication defining the term, emotional intelligence is "the subset of social intelligence that involves the *ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions"* (original emphasis, Salovey Brackett et al, 5).

[46]. Goleman did not originate the theory: emotional intelligence as we now conceive of it came from Peter Salovey and John Mayer's 1990 publication titled "Emotional Intelligence" in *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality.*

her decades ahead of this trend among drama educators: "We lose so many of our children in their youth, because we fail to provide them with enough rich cultural experiences. Artistic expression makes you more sensitive, more perceptive, more loving, and eventually more stable and mature," (qtd. in Hazziezah D8).

Although Aremu provided no theories upon which to base these claims or scientific proof about multiple intelligences or emotional intelligence in 1977, in 2012 van de Water wrote: "Recent educational theory and neuroscientific research corroborates the notion that drama has the potential to be an effective tool in educating the whole child, whether taught as a discipline or an enhancing teaching strategy" (1).[47] van de Water also notes that British drama educators Dorothy Heathcote and Brian Way "…advocated drama as a means to enhance affective, psychomotor, and cognitive skills"; Aremu and other HCTC staff attended workshops with Brian Way in London during the 1970s (van de Water 1-2; Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

From 1969-1981 HCTC's programming expanded greatly; by 1981 its four programs included: 1) a "resident repertory children's company," 2) a professional training center for youth ages 3-18, 3) new works development by new artists for children, and 4) community education/outreach in the form of "seminars and symposiums [sic] to train and disseminate children's art" (HCTC NYSCA Grant 1). Furthermore, the company had a community outreach

[47]. In my first interview with Aremu she spoke in depth about the overwhelming college graduation rates and other culturally recognized markers of "success" of the children who participated in HCTC. Aremu stated, "All the kids went to college, maybe two percent didn't go" (22 Jan. 2012).

connection to NYU and Vassar, though the extent and the capacity of the university programs remain unclear (HCTC NYSCA Grant 2). Its connection to the greater Black theatre community grew as well: at its 1980 Tenth Anniversary Celebration, the company honored the cast from the Broadway production of *Home* by Samm-Art Williams ("HCTC Co. Dinner-Dance" 40).

Aremu's political stance clearly influenced the content of the plays she wrote; she stated that she felt theatre was a means of doing political commentary (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Before founding HCTC, Aremu involved herself in sit-ins and "believed in Stokely Carmichael…I fought against segregation, apartheid like a lot of Blacks" (22 Jan. 2012).[48] Her upbringing in racially and religiously integrated Brooklyn as well as her experience attending racially-integrated schools from the age of six influenced her worldview in the direction of racial inclusion (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu didn't feel a need to separate from white people the way that many politically active Black youth of the time did. Furthermore, Aremu stated that white bigotry in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s did not influence her perception of herself or of her work: "I never concerned myself with what white people thought of me…I didn't have time to be worried about white people" (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu never experienced her race as a barrier (22 Jan. 2012). She said of her work with HCTC, "None of my plays were anti-white, they were pro-Black" and added that she worked with many influential white people, especially

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[48]. Stokely Carmichael was a graduate of Howard University who, in late Feb. 1968, became the Black Panther Party's prime minister (Marable 110). By the next year, Carmichael severed ties with the group because of its founders' (Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver) connections with the "white leftists and the biracial Peace and Freedom Party" (Marable 110).

those on the HCTC Board of Directors, who, she reports, did not ascribe to racist beliefs (22 Jan. 2012).

Play descriptions, reviews, and interviews with Aremu demonstrate that the 1970s Pan-African movement strongly influenced the artistic direction of HCTC, however this correlation should not be perceived as disingenuous in any way. Before founding HCTC, Aremu studied African culture and convinced the president of Hunter College to fund a trip to Africa for her based on the idea that in the late 1960s "everybody went to the motherland" (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).[49] Unlike some active in Pan-Africanist cultural activities, Aremu did more than pay lip service to ideas about Africa which had been watered down, made trendy, and commodified; she actually traveled to African countries and observed the culture directly. Consequently, much of the HCTC scenic and costume designs signified African and Caribbean cultural elements (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). This trip to Africa and subsequent trips there influenced Aremu's vision of costuming and her studies of the use of dance onstage in Africa also contributed to her use of dance onstage in the U.S. (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

What remains nebulous is the extent to which the Black Aesthetic permeated the productions. Despite Aremu's contention that her work with HCTC adhered to the Black Aesthetic, the form in which HCTC productions took as well as the content explored therein shows the influence of, but not total allegiance to, BAM. As stated in the previous chapter, Larry Neal's 1968 treatise "The Black Arts Movement" expresses some of BAM's basic tenets, but of

[49]. During my first interview with Aremu she spoke about how she viewed her trip to Africa as equivalent to Jews traveling to Israel to learn about their cultural heritage.

the main three, only one seems to apply to the HCTC repertoire: the fusion of all art with politics.[50] More on point with Aremu's goals for HCTC audiences is Laretta Henderson's vision of BAM as "mov[ing] toward educating the African American community to its collective and differing histories; reflect[ing] the community and its culture and concerns, and address[ing] their social, spiritual, and physical needs" (301). Perhaps most fitting of the HCTC canon is Mance Williams's description of the Black Theatre Movement which came out of BAM as "elevation of Black 'Consciousness'" and subsequent "eradication of the negative Black image created by racist-oriented literature and media through the creation of a new, more positive Black image" (16-17). Aremu believed that she was engaged in the same fight as the Black Arts Movement's most vocal proponents, but the weapons she took up in this battle differed: she used political satire and observed that theatrical audiences could "deal with" the difficult messages easier than in other BAM works because her plays took the form of musicals (22 Jan. 2012). One major difference between much of Black theatre coming out of BAM and HCTC shows is that Aremu used no profanity in any of her plays (Aremu 13 Mar. 2012). The playwright stated point blank, "The philosophy was the same, the methodology was different" (22 Jan. 2012).

As Aremu saw it, the role of children in the Black Arts Movement was to become educated academically or culturally, "to the point where they can change their destiny" (22 Jan. 2012). The venue in which theatre for children took place mattered greatly to her, which also makes her aesthetic vision stand apart from other BAM artists: "I didn't do theatre in the

[50]. The other main points in Neal's treatise are that whites no longer shall be the intended audience for Black artists and their art, and that Black artists should ascribe to communitarian values and reject the "individual" as conceived by Western society.

storefront, in a run-down little building—when you introduce kids to the arts the environment should be really nice" (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). As for the race of the HCTC participants and audiences, Aremu welcomed white children into the company and had no expectation (or requirement like Baraka's BARTS or Spirit House) of completely Black audiences (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).[51]

By 1975, HCTC had four plays in its repertoire: *Land of the Egyptians, The Liberation of Mother Goose, Babylon II and Juju Man* (Spence "Harlem" D10; Hay 203).[52] The original group of elementary school students created *Land of the Egyptians* with Aremu and Folayani's assistance, though Aremu is credited with writing and directing the play (Spence "Harlem" D10;

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[51]. Aremu stated that the racial composition of HCTC audiences depended on the venue. At the Public Theatre, the audience was integrated, at Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk it was completely Black, at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, it was all white (22 Jan. 2012).

[52]. Unfortunately, none of these original plays have been published nor have they been deposited in any archive in which I have conducted research. Thus in order to write about the play productions and plots I have had to rely primarily upon reviews in *New York Amsterdam News*, *The New York Times*, and my telephone interviews with Aremu. According to Aremu, all of her plays have been deposited at the Library of Congress and all are going into print and will be published in 2012 (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). After their publication, Aremu has requested that I deposit copies at the Child Drama Archive at Arizona State University so they will be readily available for other Theatre for Youth scholars in perpetuity.

Gussow 23). In a *New York Times* review of plays presented at the 1972 second annual Community/Street Theater Festival, Mel Gussow describes *Land* as "a fanciful yarn about how three Harlem youngsters are transported back in time" (23). Gussow also evaluates the performance:

> The unflustered performers, a few of them not much taller than the stage, played their parts with obvious relish, especially those who were called upon to be dancing girls—funkier dancing than one remembers from ancient Egypt. The dialogue was on the order of, "Who are you to insult the highest priestess of all Egypt?" answered by a casual "O.K, O.K." (23)

The Liberation of Mother Goose (1973), written by Aremu, was the most popular play in the company's repertoire and Spence described it as a "consciousness-raising play" and as a "scintillating and power-packed musical satire for children," and Aremu called it her "signature piece" (Spence, "Harlem" D10; "Liberation" D9; Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).[53] The plot centers on a girl named Alice (played by a young Black girl) searching for her rabbit; as the plot of the play progresses, the audience learns that her rabbit is an illusion ("Liberation" D9). Three hours in duration, the play included many elements: dancing, singing, live music and full costumes (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). One *Amsterdam News* reviewer described the play as "a colorful, dynamic musical which explores the meaty issues of love, interpersonal relationships and world

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[53]. Aremu originally directed *Liberation*, but well known directors of Black theatre for adults including Mical Whitaker and Gilbert Moses also directed it (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

peace through the metaphor of a young girl's fantasies" ("Children's Play"). The style of *Liberation* was "very colorful, very over-the-top" according to Aremu (22 Jan. 2012).

The play centers on African Americans' experiences with illusions and reality reflecting the shifting political climate of 1970s Harlem; away from Civil Rights integrationist ideology and toward Afrocentric worldviews and self-determination. Before Alice makes her appearance, other child actors begin the play by taking positions on the stage, pantomiming hammering nails into wood and painting after entering the house of the theater along with the audience ("Liberation" D9). Spence interprets this action as leading to the theme of the play: "They [the children's pantomime] represent Black people actively engaged in illusions (hammering imaginary nails, for instance) while piped high in reality (the presence of the audience)" ("Liberation" D9). The content and dialogue of *Liberation* contain mid-1970s revolutionary ideas and vernacular: the play begins when one child actor proclaims "The time is now!" and the "Dance of the Stars" takes place in the "Land of Black Truth and Dreams" where the dancing stars stand for "Black Truth" ("Liberation" D9). This dance occurs in complete darkness with the children's movements lit only by burning incense (Spence, "Liberation" D9). The dialogue also is reflective of the dialects heard in Harlem at the time: a commentator, dressed in a blue satin suit, performs a monologue about how "jive" nursery rhymes are before leading in the "Dance of the Stars" (Spence, "Liberation" D9). Spence writes about the play's progression from the dance to Alice's world:

> Before the dance is over, whimperings can be heard from the side wings. They soon grow into wails, until, suddenly a young Black girl rushes onto the stage

> crying. Her name is Alice, and from here on, everything in the play is designed to bring her back to reality. (“Liberation” D9)

As Alice searches for her rabbit, she encounters other nursery rhyme characters, such as Little Miss Muffet, who impart “powerful doses of truths and realities” (Spence “Liberation” D9). As a comment on race relations, Aremu cast a white woman as Muffet and a Black man as the spider: she fears the spider because of his identity as a Black male (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). A troupe of 30 tap-dancing rabbits, none of which is her rabbit, cross Alice’s path with the purpose of confusing her and sing the song “Illusion and Confusion” to taunt her further (“Liberation” D9; Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu said, “The music took the edge off of the political rhetoric [of *Liberation*], the audience could hear it…the audience could have a creative experience rather than feeling like someone hitting them over the head with a hammer [with political messages]” (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Among the other characters Alice encounters are a Black Snow White, a Fairy Godmother, Jack and Jill, and Little Red Riding Hood (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu described Little Red Riding Hood as a “little revolutionary” and “a realist” in the play (22 Jan. 2012). One group of characters Alice meets is the “Flower girls;” Alice tries to emulate them in their dancing, but they tell her she has to find out who she is and create her own dance (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Alice’s trajectory is to become “mentally and physically whole” and each character she encounters plays a part in that (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu recognizes the autobiographical influence her life had on the way she wrote Alice’s story; like Alice, Aremu said she went through a political and cultural journey in order to arrive at a “high-level [of] human development” (22 Jan. 2012).

Much like plays for adults written during the Black Arts Movement, *Liberation* aims to empower its Black audience members through a Black-centered worldview and through the rejection of hegemonic Eurocentric-American cultural legacies. The play encourages its child audience to question the relevance to their lives of seemingly innocuous nursery rhymes: Spence writes that the play "exposes the illusions inherent in familiar nursery tales and re-adapts them to meaningful everyday Black experiences" ("Liberation" D9). Another reviewer states that the play is "…a story about nursery rhymes and fairy tales from a Black perspective" (*Liberation of Mother* D5). In this way, *Liberation* foreshadows the musical *The Wiz* (1974) in its use of story familiar to most Americans as a jumping-off point for exploration and insertion of African American experiences and perspectives.[54]

Aremu said she retired *Liberation* in 1985 after demand for the play, after its twelve years on tour, finally died down (22 Jan. 2012). *Liberation* changed in the course of its run as Aremu grew as a writer; in 1978 Aremu worked on a major revision of the play upon receipt of creative guidance from Joseph Walker (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Although initially hesitant to revise the play, Walker convinced her by telling her "If you cannot change your work, you're not really a writer" (Walker qtd. in Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Because of this revision and subsequent direction of the play by directors for adults, such as Gilbert Moses at the Public Theater and Mical Whitaker, Aremu felt *Liberation* evolved from being a simplistic play to a complex off-Broadway production (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

[54]. *The Wiz* premiered in Baltimore in 1974 and moved to Broadway in 1975.

Like *Land*, *Babylon II* occurs in a mythical place and loosely follows the Biblical story of Babylon (Grimes D8). Aremu wrote the play after spending three months in Europe (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Spence reports that the plot centers on human beings' attempts to endure in an evil society ("Harlem" D11). Another reviewer states: "*Babylon II* effects [sic] a satirical look at the parallels of a modern day society and the Babylon of ancient Biblical times. It poses the question; What if this society keeps on happening by the new century?" ("Playwright"). Aremu wrote the play, AUDELCO award-winning Reggie Life directed it, and a former Alvin Ailey company dancer John Parks choreographed it (Spence "Harlem" D11; Grimes D8; "'Babylon II'" D15).[55] In the play, the Babylonians live in a self-centered and hedonist fashion, caring only about themselves and fighting with others (Grimes D8). Eventually, the divine intervenes and appeals to the three wisest residents with the message "It is better to love than hate. It is better to give than take" (qtd. in Grimes D8). Another *Amsterdam News* reviewer writes, "The cast of children ranging in age from 4 to 14 years old tell the audience that love is one of the ways to conquer evil" ("Sonia" D14). At first the Babylonians ignore this message, but soon are persuaded that love is the path to salvation and that their lifestyles will lead only to self-destruction (Grimes D8).

In what appears to be a slam against white culture's negative influence on the Harlem community, the child performers proclaim: "The white witch brings drugs. Stay away. Let the white witch dance alone" (qtd. in Grimes D8). The drug trade proliferated throughout the Harlem community in the 1970s and schoolchildren in this neighborhood were not sheltered from this

[55]. In 1976, Reggie Life won an AUDELCO award for his direction of the play with an adult cast *Hail, Hail the Gangs* (Grimes D8).

reality (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). The play's conclusion is not exactly a happy ending; although the Babylonians are finally reached, they urge the child audience to heed the play's message in the real world outside of the world of the play "'We gotta change our minds, and then we gotta change our ways. Cause only you and you and you can stop Babylon II'" (Grimes D8). In some ways the ending reads like a didactic political message, yet concurrently it can be seen as the child performers telling the children (and their parents) in the audience that they have the agency to make their own choices and improve their society should they choose to do so. Although the play contains the "white witch" reference, unlike many adult plays in the Black Arts Movement canon, this play appears to advocate for self-determination for Blacks rather than a violent stance intended to punish "whitey" for the numerous injustices "he" perpetrated against Blacks throughout American history. Although *Babylon II* retired in 1992, in 2012 Aremu was considering putting it up again because she has been asked to do so (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012; Aremu 13 Mar. 2012). As of this writing, Aremu is engaged in marketing her play to producers and has secured a director, choreographer, and lead cast members (Email from Aremu 17 July 2012).

Aremu's trips to Nigeria prompted her to write *JuJu Man*, based on a Nigerian folktale ("Company" 54; Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). In the play, four children from New York City travel to Africa "under duress" and the plot explores what happens to them there (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). In further support of the idea that Aremu's vision ran contrary to that of the Black Aesthetic, in *JuJu Man* Aremu stated that she was "honest" about the fact that African tribes in Nigeria sold other Africans into the slave trade (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Some audience members were angered and complained to Aremu about this depiction of Black culpability; as Aremu explained, "They wanted to blame whites solely, but that is not factually accurate" (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

By the early 1970s HCTC began to establish itself as a professional company and started touring. The company performed its repertoire extensively throughout New York City at such venues as public schools, the Billie Holiday Theatre, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the National Black Theatre, Union Settlement Performing Arts Theatre, the Gene Frankel Theatre, Lincoln Center Library, Manhattan Town Hall, and St. Marks Playhouse (Spence, "Harlem" D11; "Children's"; HCTC, "In Cooperation"; "Children's Theatre at Town").[56] HCTC participated in several city-wide festivals, including the 1972 and 1973 festivals at Lincoln Center, the 1974 Apollo Theater's first Children's Theatre Festival (see fig. 3.3), the 1975 New York Shakespeare Festival, and the 1976 New York City Theatre Festival ("Fun"; "City's Festival"; Spence, "Harlem" D11; "Children's Theatre").[57] According to a 1974 *Amsterdam News* article about the Apollo festival, "This is the first time such an endeavor has been taken by the Apollo theatre which hopes to bring children from all over the New York State area to attend its first program of children's theatre" ("Children's Theatre"). Gilbert Moses served as Director Consultant for the Apollo Festival, where HCTC performed every Saturday for two months

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[56]. HCTC and the Billie Holiday Theatre had a special relationship wherein HCTC was contracted to open many of Aremu's plays there through the Theatre for Little Folk program (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu stated that shows opened at the Billie Holiday Theatre when in their "experimental stage;" two such plays were *JuJu Man*, and *Babylon II* (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

[57]. Other companies which participated but performed less frequently were The Asambi Omi Laiye Dance Co., The Brewery Puppet Troupe, and Vinnie Burrows African Folktales ("Children's Theatre").

Fig. 3.3. Photograph of original Harlem Children's Theatre Company cast performing *Liberation of Mother Goose* at the Apollo Children's Theatre Festival in 1974. (Personal collection of Aduke Aremu).

("Children's Theatre"). The four main plays in HCTC's repertoire, *Land*, *JuJu Man*, *Bablylon II*, and *Liberation* played at the festival ("Children's Theatre"). While directing *Liberation* at the Apollo festival, Aremu convinced a child member of her cast to jump from the theater's balcony to the stage during a dance, which the child did for the show's two-week run (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). In 1974, HCTC participated in the Black Theatre Alliance festival of plays at the Harlem Cultural Center ("Black Stage" 49).

HCTC grew rapidly from 1971-1978: in 1978 the company moved from Harlem to its 42nd Street location in the Theatre Row building where it occupied two 1,000 square foot lofts used for rehearsals and workshops (HCTC Grant). [58] According to Aremu, the company was asked to move its headquarters from Harlem into the Theatre Row building: she agreed because she wanted HCTC to be located in Times Square to improve the visibility of youth theatre and believed the location would help "legitimize" her theatre (22 Jan. 2012). From a contemporary lens, one might imagine that a move from Harlem to glitzy Times Square constituted a step-up in the world, but during this time period, Times Square had yet to be gentrified or cleaned up by NYC Mayor Bloomberg. Aremu spoke of the difficulty this new location caused for her and her students: prostitutes and drug addicts could be seen right outside of the rehearsal room windows and Aremu and other adults needed to escort the children to and from the train stops because they were no longer safe traveling alone (22 Jan. 2012).

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[58]. Jackie Onaissis served on Board of Directors for the Theatre Row project and was one of its major funders (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

Harlem Children's Theatre Company also toured outside of New York state. In 1979 the company performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC ("HCTC-Where"). HCTC toured internationally as well: The first HCTC performance trip abroad took place in 1977 at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos, Nigeria where the group performed *Liberation* ("HCTC-Where"; Tapley, "Business" A3; Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Of particular relevance to Theatre for Youth history, HCTC was the only youth theatre from the U.S. to attend the festival (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu said she demanded that there be a youth company present because she believed children's theatre to be essential and that "it is very important for children to be onstage doing art because it helps them become politically astute and creative entities" (22 Jan. 2012). She had the largest theatre company at the festival and HCTC took up 75 seats on the airplane (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). The group also led the U.S. contingent in entering the coliseum in the opening ceremony (See fig. 3.4) (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu was able to secure government funding for the FESTAC trip (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Because of the success of the company's performance at FESTAC, representatives from England, France, Italy, Germany, and Switzerland invited HCTC to perform in their respective countries and promised free housing in each country (Tapley "Business" A4).

Initially unable to secure government grants or raise adequate funds at three benefit events to cover the European trip, the child company members, their parents, and HCTC staff paid for the trip by using their savings and taking out personal loans (Tapley C10). Aremu said nearly every child's family paid about half the costs of the flights and the company took care of the rest of the expenses, even if it meant some of the staff members contributed from their own

Fig. 3.4. Photograph of Stadium in Lagos, Nigeria where Harlem Children's Theatre Company led procession of United States participants, taken in 1977. Personal collection of Aduke Aremu.

salaries (18 July 2012).[59] In the summer of 1978 the company performed in Europe: on Bastille Day the members performed excerpts from *Liberation* and *Land* at the plaza in front of the Eiffel Tower (Tapley C10). Aremu described her young company members as being like "little movie stars" and insisted they should stay in four and five-star hotels throughout Europe (22 Jan. 2012). The cost of "luxury" accommodation in Europe was not prohibitive because the group traveled off-season and such hotels were much less expensive than their U.S. counterparts (Aremu 18 July 2012). This would be the first time many of the children had ever left New York City as sixty percent of the children came from poor, inner-city neighborhoods; to Aremu it was essential that these children see that another lifestyle was possible for them (Aremu 18 July 2012). The performance trips abroad can be seen as a form of reward or compensation for their year-round work for which they received no monetary compensation. Aremu said, "For a lot of children, it [traveling to Europe] totally changed their lives" (18 July 2012).

The underlying philosophy of working with children was to treat them as professionals and hold them to similar standards. In order to do this, auditions were required for entry into the company and professional directors, choreographers, composers, drama, voice and music instructors worked on productions (Grimes D8). Because Aremu had such a large group of performers to draw from and generous funding of the productions, she was easily able to recruit professional directors and choreographers who normally worked with adults to work with her young charges (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Child performers in the company rehearsed or attended classes an average of 15-20 hours each week (HCTC NYSCA Grant 3). The youngest children

[59]. Aremu told me that airline travel in the 1970s cost much less than today and that airlines used to offer much-reduced fares for children (18 July 2012).

who traveled alone by train to Harlem were about nine or ten years of age; the group rehearsed every night after school and all day on Saturday and Sunday afternoons (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Sometimes Aremu held rehearsals at her apartment in the Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn in which up to 30 children attended at once (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu was struck by their dedication to rehearsing seven days a week and said that the children did not come to the rehearsals "because I made them, but because they loved it" (22 Jan. 2012).

Spence reports that at the time HCTC held the title as "…the only Black children's repertory theatre company offering highly professional training to young children 4-17" ("Harlem" D11). Aremu noted that many of the youth cast members became talented professionals, regardless of their chosen fields; several became lawyers, doctors, and CPAs (22 Jan. 2012). The founder believed that college was easy for these youth because they had become accustomed to working hard from an early age (22 Jan. 2012).

Although professionalism was valued highly in HCTC, it did not come at the expense of the children's enjoyment or happiness. In order to create theatre successfully with youth, Aremu believed that children needed to love, respect, and trust the adults they worked with and know that the adults were not invested in them to "make some money"; making theatre together was fun for the children and for Aremu, who said that neither she nor the youth viewed it as work (22 Jan. 2012).To Aremu, it was very important that the children she worked with be happy and gave the example that if a child disliked his or her costume, she would buy him or her another one; her explanation of this behavior was that after a child has worked hundreds of hours in rehearsals, as a responsible director it was her duty to provide the child with what he or she needed to be happy onstage and that the children deserved to be in high-quality costumes (22 Jan. 2012).

Judging from the many positive reviews of the children's performances, it appears that HCTC met Aremu's goals for professional-quality performances by children. In a review of *Babylon II* from 1976, the writer states "…in this production the timing was nearly dead-center, cues were made, and, on the rare occasion when a performer forgot a line, he or she quickly recovered. Polished is the word" (Grimes D8). Other articles describe the child performers as "New York's finest young professional performers" and state that some "have gone on to successful careers in television acting" ("Children's"; "Cook, Aremu" B3).[60] Furthermore, one of the functions HCTC intended to perform was to serve broadcast media and theatre communities by developing "juvenile talent" (HCTC NYSCA Grant 3).

Though not covered in newspaper articles about HCTC, behind the scenes Aremu stressed the educational achievement of her child performers first and foremost. Specifically, she examined the children's report cards and if they failed any course, or were in danger of failing a course (Aremu considered anything less than a score of C+ as "failing"), she removed them from the cast touring internationally with her in the summer (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu stated that some of her students' teachers would call her telling her that he or she had students in her company asking for extra work in order to improve their grades so that they would be allowed to go on tour with HCTC in the summer (22 Jan. 2012). Aremu believed that these teachers saw

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[60]. Two former HCTC company members have successful careers in the entertainment industry: Zorikh Lequidre became a swordsmen in television and movies and James Bond III became an actor who is the CEO and founder of two companies: Solid Rock Pictures and Underground Railroad Company, a music and video company (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

the same connection between the arts and education as she did: That the two fields mutually reinforce one another (22 Jan. 2012).

At least one reporter viewed HCTC as serving an important educational function outside of the dissemination of Black culture. In Lionel Mitchell's glowing article, he writes

> The idea of really teaching young children the Theatrical Arts is to guarantee them a future of poise, articulation and self-awareness that will carry them through life. Harlem Children's Theatre Co. ought to be cited as a model for the entire educational effort. Here the cry is not 'Save the Children' at all because they are already saved: they are saving themselves. (36)

A part of what Mitchell observed was likely due to Aremu's interesting requirement for her troupe: Each child needed to have a "level of integrity" and a "moral imperative," meaning each child needed to display ethical behavior and believe in something greater than themselves (22 Jan. 2012). Aremu designed her program so that it "took a holistic approach to life" and explained that there were days when the youth were with her from 7 am until midnight over the summers (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

HCTC served children outside of the company by providing open admission and general enrollment opportunities for training programs, workshops and classes (HCTC NYSCA Grant 3). These classes met for two to four hours per week for 42 weeks and enrollment averaged approximately 120-150 students weekly (HCTC NYSCA Grant 3). In 1979, some classes took place on Saturdays and started at 9:30 am and ended at 3:00 pm with a break for lunch ("HCTC-Where"). Although the company charged $15 a month in 1980 to participate in its programs,

only about ten percent of students actually paid this amount: most students received scholarships (HCTC NYSCA Grant 8).

The demographics of the company appear to have shifted once it moved from Harlem to the Theatre Row building. In the early 1970s HCTC attracted youth from the neighborhoods of Harlem, Brooklyn, and Queens (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). By 1980, although 99 percent of the children who participated either as company members or as students in HCTC classes were "minority," only 25 percent of the children came from Harlem (HCTC NYSCA Grant 4).[61] In later years it appears that the company became more demographically diverse in the direction of including more white children. Aremu estimated that over the years, HCTC's racial composition averaged about 60 percent Black, 35 percent Latino, and five percent white (22 Jan. 2012). Interestingly, Mitchell's 1982 article positively critiqued "white kids" at the workshop classes "who were into mastering techniques of Black movement and dance…and were not the least bit self-conscious or awkward in movement" (39).

The company fulfilled an educative function by hosting symposia aimed at parents and other adults in community organizations about performing arts for children and other dimensions of children's culture. Aremu conceived of one such symposium in 1977 around the idea of enriching Black children's cultural lives by exploring relevant extant cultural opportunities and organizations for them (Hazziezah D8). Aremu explained her reasoning for the forum:

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[61]. The term "minority" is not defined on the NYSCA application, leading one to assume the term described African-American and Latino children.

> Our children are our most important commodities, yet parents often are too uninformed, localized-reluctant to take their children outside of the immediate vicinity or otherwise engaged to investigate the score of qualitative Black presentations for children. That is why I called this gathering of distinguished children's entertainment producers. (qtd. in Hazziezah D8)

The fields represented at the forum included children's literature, radio and television, theatre for Black children, mime, dance, music, and art (Hazziezah D8). Another theatre company studied in this dissertation, the Billie Holiday Theatre (and its Bubble Gum Players) also presented information, as did Brad Brewer, the director of a Black puppet troupe, which often performed at the Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk (Hazziezah D8). The presence of these groups at the symposium indicate that rather than seeing each other's companies as competitors they viewed one another as partners working to enhance aesthetic experiences for Black children in the 1970s. Aremu shared her view of their cooperative practices:

> The notion of us competing against each other is ludicrous; the days of us competing are coming to an end. Basically, I designed the symposium to emphasize the necessity of all of us joining our hands together. Not just intellectually, but in the truest reality of uniting to strengthen mutual interests and aspirations, and to fortify ourselves to better serve our common audience—the Black child. (qtd. in Hazziezah D8)

Many U.S. theatre companies aimed at adults have historically served either children or young adult populations through educational outreach programs. Interestingly, HCTC flipped this

script: despite its initial identity as a children's theatre company, later in its history the theatre's focus expanded to include adult casts and adult students in workshop classes. In 1974, Aremu took *Babylon II* and cast it with adults from the Essex County College Drama Group and presented it at the National Black Theatre in Harlem ("Playwright"). An *Amsterdam News* article focusing on Aremu's playwriting recounts this staging "[*Babylon II*] was recently adapted, experimentally, for an adult cast. The response to this fifteen member college cast has been overwhelmingly enthusiastic" ("Playwright"). In the early 1970s, the Negro Ensemble Company staged *Liberation* with an adult cast at the New York Shakespeare Festival ("Children's Play"). HCTC opened up some of its workshops in the 1980s to adult students; these workshops were described as intensive and designed for professionals (HCTC NYSCA Grant).

The end of the company being known as the Harlem Children's Theatre Company occurred in 1983 at the suggestion of Marty Markowitz, one of its board members (Aremu 13 Mar. 2012). Aremu reported that Markowitz felt that since the company had not functioned out of Harlem for several years, Aremu should rename for the company to reflect that change (Aremu 13 Mar. 2012). Concurrently, Markowitz made his request around the same time that Aremu's focus shifted from using solely child casts to inclusion of adult actors ("Aremu"; Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). The merging of adult performers with youth performers began in the 1980s; Aremu felt that this way she could achieve a level of professional quality with the adults and that the children would learn to deepen their performances from the professional adults (22 Jan. 2012). The way in which Aremu adapted her casting methods is this: at first she would open plays she had written with only child actors and as the plays developed she would transition to

using a half-child/half-adult cast (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Aremu chose to rename the group the Dove Players in 1983 (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

The company experienced another major change in 1993, when it relocated to Brooklyn because of the spike in rent at the Times Square Theatre Row location (Aremu 18 July 2012). Its new neighborhood offered many funding opportunities; Aremu secured the use of the entire Brooklyn Masonic Temple on Saturdays for very little rent as well as classroom space in Brooklyn public schools (Aremu 13 Mar. 2012). Aremu believes that Brooklyn emerged as an artistic center during this era, with Black artists such as P. Diddy, Jay-Z, and Queen Latifah all coming from the neighborhood (Aremu 13 Mar. 2012).

Aremu continued to classify the Dove Players as a youth company from 1984-2004 (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). The new group participated in many "inter-borough" (inter-neighborhood) productions until its end in 2004 upon Aremu's relocation to Atlanta, GA (Aremu 13 Mar. 2012). After Aremu changed the group's name, the newspaper trail, at least in the *New York Amsterdam News*, disappears. [62] Aremu reported that Brooklyn companies did not receive much notoriety in the New York city press which, in her view, accounts for the lack of coverage (18 July 2012).

The founder considers the transformation of her company from HCTC to Dove Players to be the beginning of the second part of her career (Aremu 13 Mar. 2012). While she continued to work with the theatre company, she also found other ways to continue to affect change in the

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[62]. I have conducted many academic database searches for the Dove Players and found no articles pertaining to this company.

lives of young people. Aremu worked for three separate Departments of Education in New York City, the state of Connecticut, and Westchester County ("Notes from Congressional" E429). She founded a school called the International Arts Business School at Wingate High School which received a three million dollar grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as well as support from the United Federation of Teachers and the New York City Board of Education ("Notes from Congressional" E430). Aremu has worked as a consultant to two organizations which once provided funding for HCTC: the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts ("Notes from Congressional" E430). U.S. Representative Edolphus Towns, who once served on HCTC's Board of Directors, stated that while Aremu worked as an educator and administrator "she created and organized numerous children's projects, productions and workshops to include innovative practices in education and progressive arts and reading programs" (Towns qtd. in "Notes from Congressional" E430).

Upon looking back at her history with HCTC and Dove Players, Aremu said,

> My desire was to change the lives of people who lived in the inner-city because I was fortunate enough to be exposed to the arts at a very young age…so I wanted to expose Black and Latino and other Third World children to the arts…I wanted to give them an experience they never would have had otherwise. (18 July 2012)

Harlem Children's Theatre Company left its mark not only on the many children who participated in the company over its more than two decade span, but also on the field of Black Theatre for Youth. It did so by showing that young Black children had the capacity and aptitude for performing in professional level theatrical productions. Although the children did none of the

writing of the plays they performed, it appears that they held agency regarding their level of participation within the company and definitely had a say regarding how they appeared onstage in costume. Nearly every review speaks of the child casts' energy and confidence and of the productions' high artistic standards. It is fortunate for the scores of children Aremu directed that she preferred working with young people, giving the youth an unique opportunity for overseas travel and full participation in professional quality performances.

At a June 2012 reunion of Harlem Children's Theatre Company held at the National Black Theatre, Aremu had the opportunity to speak with many of those children she worked with, who are now adults. She told me that the participants seized the opportunity to share with her how much being a part of the company positively affected their lives and contributed to their self-esteem (Aremu 18 July 2012). As Aremu spoke about how proud they were of themselves, she said, "You couldn't tell any of these kids that they were any different from the kids who went to Julliard!" (18 July 2012).[63] Clearly, Aremu's Harlem Children's Theatre Company set the bar for Black Theatre for Youth quite high and it remains to be seen if any other company in the field will achieve the prominence and international reputation for excellence this company achieved during the late 1970s.

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[63]. Obviously the now-adult students are biased in favor of Harlem Children's Theatre Company over Julliard.

Chapter 4

Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk

"Theater is not something people here [Bed-Stuy neighborhood of Brooklyn] think about. What they think about is survival and food" (Brabham qtd. in Lem 130).

The Billie Holiday Theatre (BHT) is the only theatre in this study which arose from a non-profit organization not dedicated to the arts. Rather, the BHT came out of the sponsoring organization Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, founded by the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy in 1967 ("Theatre for Little"; Lem 130). The organization's current (2012) website states that it

> partners with residents and business to improve the quality of life of Central Brooklyn by fostering economic self-sufficiency, enhancing family stability and growth, promoting the arts and culture and transforming the neighborhood into a safe, vibrant place to live, work and visit. (*Bedford Stuyvesant*)

The theatre's longtime Artistic Director, Marjorie Moon, explains the function of Bed-Stuy Corp., the first community development corporation in the U.S.: "The founders believed that individuals should be helped in a gestalt type of way—economically, physically, socially/culturally. So they developed a cultural unit" (qtd. in Deni).

A Vincent Astor Foundation grant of $320,000 paid for the creation of the theater building (Moses "Billie" 1). The Billie Holiday Theatre, begun in 1972, intended to serve the purported "second largest Black community in this country" by exposure to and engagement with several artistic fields, including drama, dance, music, film, creative writing, and technical theatre (Moses "Restoration" 40; "The Theatre"). More specifically, the goals of the BHT

included the recognition and enhancement of talent already present within the surrounding, majority-Black community and to provide this community with high-quality professional arts programming (Moses, “Restoration” 40; “The Theatre”).

Audience development was a major aim of BHT. To this end, the theatre attempted to stage productions familiar to community members (Moses, “Restoration” 40). “Big name” stars and popular musicians, poets, actors, and dancers also attracted community members, such as actors Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, poets Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni, and musicians Ronnie Dyson and Black Ivory (Moses, “Billie” 2; “The Theatre”). [64] Moses writes that BHT wanted to “involve community at all levels of participation” and community members themselves found ways to use the theatre to serve their community by hosting theatre parties wherein some of the money brought in at the performances benefited neighborhood, church, and social service groups (“Restoration” 40; Moses “Billie” 2). By 1980, the 218-seat theatre had nearly sold-out performance seasons (BHT NYSCA Grant 15). Tickets for both adults and children were low cost: In the mid-to-late 1970s, ticket prices ranged from $1-$3 (McCaslin, *Historical* 80; “The Bed-Stuy”). BHT appears to have been successful in garnering a large audience base from the Bed-Stuy neighborhood and beyond, and a grant application deemed it “one of the major Black theatres in NYC” (BHT NYSCA Grant 4). The theatre was a member of the Black Theatre Alliance organization and once served as the host venue for the Black Theatre Alliance Festival (McCaslin, *Historical* 80; “Billie Holiday Theatre: Season”). BHT had no resident company for adults per se, but rather appears to have served as a sponsoring agency for

[64]. By 1974, only two years after the theatre’s opening, Davis, Dee, Dyson, and Giovanni had all appeared at BHT (Moses, “Billie” 2).

outside productions. However, the theatre hosted three companies for adults, The Cornbread Players, The Alonzo Players, and Voices, Inc. (Moses, "Restoration" 42; "Billie Holiday Theatre: Season").

Like other theatres studied here, federal and private funds paid for the theatre's operation rather than reliance on revenue generated from ticket sales. In 1981, Moon explained the theatre's funding situation in an interview:

> We are being recognized as a truly professional theatre that is based in a rather large, well-defined community. We need subsidies in order to allow us to maintain the high quality of artists and productions showcased here, by being able to pay these professionals a living wage. (qtd. in Perkins 40)

In 1977, the NEA granted the theatre $10,000 to fund a performing theatre arts instruction program for children and adults, about which Brooklyn Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm had mixed feelings ("Chisholm" D2). She was glad for the receipt of the funding yet disappointed with the amount of the award when compared with the quantity of funding available ("Chisholm" D2). Chisholm spoke of this inequity: "I have been investigating the funding of Black and other minority artistic and cultural organizations from the Arts Endowment during the past year [1976]. It is pitifully low. And it is clear that we are being disproportionately funded" (qtd. in "Chisholm" D2). According to the Congresswoman, the NEA gave less than one percent of its music funding to Black groups and only three percent of dance funding to Black groups ("Chisholm" D2). In a bold statement, Chisholm expressed how the lack of equal funding distribution would affect her efforts in Congress: "Unless I see a concrete and dramatic reversal

of this neglect of our communities, I will not support efforts to fund programs which benefit the affluent segments of society at the expense of our disadvantaged minorities" ("Chisholm" D2). Hatch writes about the strategies BHT employed to raise adequate funding:

> Moon invited other theatre companies to share the space, a policy that provided funds while keeping the theatre in use. However, an annual budget of $230,000 in 1974 dollars was difficult to raise. Ten years later, the budget had doubled to nearly $500,000, and in spite of success, the budget was still difficult to raise. Part of the solution was to produce shows for $35,000 to $40,000 and charge $13 for a ticket, as compared to Broadway's $75 or $100. ("From Hansberry to Shange" 405)

BHT relied upon government funding to such a degree that the early 1980s imposition of the Reagan administration policies of cutting arts funding proved difficult for the theatre as it attempted to shift away "from heavy dependence on various federal sources to more diversified, private sector monies" (BHT NYSCA Grant 4). In 1980, the NEA gave BHT a three-year challenge grant for $100,000, with the condition that within three years BHT needed to garner three dollars for every one dollar granted from the NEA, in addition to money the theatre received for yearly operating expenses (BHT NYSCA Grant 4; Perkins 40). The Ford Foundation supported BHT with a $100,000 grant in 1980 and $50,000 the following year as the last installment of a two-year $150,000 grant for operating expenses (BHT NYSCA Grant 14; Perkins 40). The deep cuts to federal funding resulted in the "parent institution" of Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corp's decision to stop paying the rent of the theatre space in 1980 (BHT NYSCA Grant 15).

The year the Billie Holiday Theater for Little Folk (BHTLF) came to be is unclear; advertisements for its productions first appeared in the *Amsterdam News* in 1973. BHTLF became an especially popular aspect of BHT. One *Amsterdam News* reporter called BHTLF "one of the Theatre's greatest successes" and a reviewer of the company's 1980-81 New York State Council on the Arts grant application wrote "The children's program being considered here is excellent in all respects" ("The Theatre"; BHT NYSCA Grant 4). Its productions were described as "educational and entertaining" by a *New York Times* reporter (Lem 130). The program received at least two AUDELCO awards in 1974: a Board of Directors Award and a Recognition Award for "pioneering in children's theatre" (Robinson 80; "The Theatre"). In 1974, BHTLF had 3,000 subscribers and charged $1 for single tickets and provided complimentary passes to those who could not afford to pay (Lem 130). The company had a "summer workshop" in 1974 and in order to fund this program raised funds through a performance called *Poetry for Billie* by the Harlem Children's Theatre Company, followed by a "wine and cheese disco" recommended for adults only ("Come Spend" D15).

The idea behind BHTLF was a continuation of the audience development mission of BHT aimed at children. Toni Brabham, the program coordinator of BHTLF, was described as a "dynamic leader in New York's Black Children's Theatre Movement" (Hazziezah D8). An article published in the *New York Times* in 1974 quoted Brabham as talking about the poverty experienced in the Bed-Stuy neighborhood, yet believing that in spite of the material conditions Black children deserved access to the arts. She said, "But there's a need for Black children to learn, enjoy, perform and entertain. We try to serve children in the community by exposing them to all kinds of entertainment so they can get well-rounded cultural experience" (Lem 130). The

preceding highlights the major difference between Black Theatre for Youth and mainstream Theatre for Youth in the 1970s: Black Theatre for Youth often was created within impoverished environments whereas the intended child audiences of mainstream Theatre for Youth did not, as a general rule, live in poverty. [65] According to sociologists David J. Eggebeen and Daniel T. Lichter,

> In 1960, Black children were over three times more likely than white children to be living in families with incomes below the official poverty line. Black children were 4.6 times more likely than white children to be deeply poor and 3.5 times more likely to be relatively poor. (809) [66] [67]

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[65]. However, mainstream Theatre for Youth did begin to recognize ethnic minorities in ways it had not previously. According to McCaslin, "An objective of the seventies was to encourage pride in ethnic cultures and to give children an opportunity to share their cultures with others" (*Theatre for Children* 292-293). McCaslin also notes that many community theatres continued to produce "traditional fare" for their child audiences (*Theatre for Children* 293).

[66]. Eggebeen and Daniel T. Lichter define "deep poverty" as "the percentage of children in families with money income less than fifty percent of the official poverty threshold for their family size" (804).

[67]. The authors define "relative poverty rate" as "defined in terms of family income adjusted for size on the basis of the equivalence scales implied in the official (and deep) poverty threshold" (805).

The next decade's census showed that, once again, the percentage of African American children living in poverty was much greater than white children: In 1970, 41 percent of African American children lived in poverty vs. ten percent of white children (*Information*).

Brabham also stated, "It's not an all-Black" theatre, but Lem wrote "she [Brabham] conceded that the themes of most of the productions are related to the Black experience, whether the shows are based on classic fairy tales or ghetto life" (130). Aremu of the Harlem Children's Theatre Company described the audiences at BHTLF as Black (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). Nellie McCaslin noted that the work produced by BHTLF often focused on African and Caribbean arts (*Historical* 80), like HCTC. Although BHTLF focused primarily on culturally relevant performances for Black children, the theatre did not direct all its attention away from mainstream culture. For example, one article states that the company's productions were not "restricted to ethnic offerings," while another points out that the theatre wanted to attract a variety of ethnic groups as well as "classical music and dance to balance its program" ("The Theatre"; Lem 130). An advertisement for BHTLF shows in December 1976 indicates that the performances were marketed directly to Black children: in it, a cartoon-like drawing depicts three children drawn inside a balloon, a boy, girl, and baby hold their respective balloons and both older children sport Afro hairstyles ("The Award Winning"). In essence, the BHTLF programming can be ideologically classified as leaning toward multiculturalism wherein the experiences of various ethnic groups are explored and no group serves as the cultural yardstick with which to measure the validity or normality of any other. That being said, like the Harlem Children's Theatre Company, the programming (to be described in the next section) is at least in part Afrocentric and Pan-Africanist, but not extreme enough to fit into the Black Arts Movement paradigm.

As Brabham stated, “What we are interested in is exposing the community to a wide variety of theatre and cultural experiences” (“The Theatre”). [68] Variety is the term most fitting to describe the BHTLF repertoire. BHTLF brought plays, puppet shows, magicians, dance and musical programs to children ages 3-13 years old on Saturday afternoons and occasionally ran performances for school groups during the week (McCaslin, *Historical* 80; Moses, “Restoration” 42). [69] Unfortunately, the information about the productions which took place between 1973 and 1980 is mostly limited to that which can be gleaned from advertisements and theatre announcements (rather than reviews) published in *Amsterdam News*.

One art form that the theatre devoted much attention toward was puppetry, which makes this company unique among those examined here. BHTLF aimed to include Black puppeteers in its offerings as well as puppet shows with a Black cultural or historical focus. In 1978 BHTLF

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[68]. One way in which Brabham accomplished this was to coordinate trips for community members to attend the World Black Festival in Nigeria in December 1976 and January 1977 (Feddoes B4).

[69]. In 1977 and 1978, BHTLF began to include specific production recommendations in their advertisements for day care groups, especially productions including mime, clowns, singing and dancing, audience participation, and puppetry (“Billie Holiday”; “Billie Holiday Theatre” 25 Feb. 1978). Children day care aged are under five years old, what is now considered the age of Theatre for the Very Young. Theatre for the Very Young or “baby theatre” is considered a relatively recent, 21st century, innovation in the mainstream U.S. field of Theatre of Young Audiences; it is fascinating to consider it may have been happening in the U.S. as early as the 1970s.

hosted an "April Puppetmania" event in which four puppet groups performed on Tuesday and Wednesday mornings: at least two of the groups were Black puppeteers ("April Puppetmania"). Probably intending to reflect the focus on Black puppeteers, an advertisement for the event published in *Amsterdam News* shows two Black arms and hands which hold strings in the manner of the children's game "Cats-in-the-Cradle" (See fig. 4.1) ("April Puppetmania"). Several other Black puppet troupes performed at BHTLF in other years, including Lewis McMillian, Zomar's Black puppets, Winnie Wilson's Puppets and the Mad Rag Puppets ("Billie Holiday Theatre: Season"). The Afro-American Puppet Troupe performed Mae Jackson's *The Jackson Five Meets Malcolm X* in 1974 ("The Afro-American"). The Yoruba Puppet Show by the Bric Bass Puppets in 1975 demonstrates the theatre's attention on African culture, even in puppetry ("Theatre Notes" 23 Apr. 1975).

Brad Brewer's Brewery Puppet Troupe, another Black puppet group, often performed at BHTLF. Brewer began his troupe in 1973 while a student at the Pratt Institute (Hazziezah D8). In 1974, his group put up *A Night at the Apollo Theatre* at BHTLF which featured puppet portrayals of such notable Black entertainers as John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Al Green, Isaac Hayes, Eddie Palmieri, Bill "BoJangles" Robinson and Billie Holiday ("Theatre Notes" 12 Oct. 1974). Other shows in Brewer's repertoire were *The Jackson Five Meets Malcolm X* and *Harriet Tubman*; both were described as "well-received" (Hazziezah D8). [70] A columnist for *Amsterdam News* described the 1978 Brewery production of *Smartina and the Jungle Book* as "wholesome entertainment [that] will inspire our kids" ("World of Duke"). The troupe appears to have been so successful and prolific that in June 1976 it hosted its own puppetry festival in at BHTLF

[70]. Another show put up by Brewer was called *Frederick Douglass in Harlem* (Hazziezah D8).

4/1/78
Amst News

BILLIE HOLIDAY THEATRE FOR LITTLE FOLK

APRIL PUPPETMANIA

Tues. 4 ★ WINNIE WILSON PUPPETS "A Visit from the Tin Man"

Wed. 5 ★★★ JUDY CADEN PUPPETS "Jack & the Beanstalk"

Tues. 25 ★ ★★ RUSSELL THE CLOWN «Magic Show»

Wed. 26 ★ ★★★ ZOMAR THE GREAT

Toni Brabham, Program Coordinator 636-7831

Box Office: 636-0919
Curtain: 11:00 a.m.
$1.50 children $2.00 adults

A member of the American Community Theatre Association and the Black Theatre Alliance.

1368 FULTON ST. BROOKLYN, N.Y. 11216

Fig. 4.1. Advertisement for April 1978 puppet festival at Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk. Reprinted with permission from Hatch-Billops Collection and *New York Amsterdam News*.

which included three productions: *Harriet Tubman*, *A Message for Smartina*, and *Stevie* by John Steptoe ("The Brewery Puppet"). Perhaps in part because of the visibility granted him by BHTLF, Brewer experienced an increased demand for his work in the New York school systems in 1977 (Hazziezah D8). The troupe is still performing, as of 2012 and has achieved fame with "Crowtations" near Central Park (See fig. 4.2) (Pogrebin "Anatomy").

Like the partnership which arose between the Brewery Puppet Troupe and BHTLF, a community arts partnership formed between Aremu of the Harlem Children's Theatre Company and Brabham. In this arrangement, HCTC held a three-year contract to premiere work still in its experimental stage at the Billie Holiday Theatre (Aremu 22 Jan. 2012). HCTC not only premiered its new work there; in addition to staging the first run of *JuJu Man*, *Babylon II*, and *Lunatics*, the company also performed its "signature" piece *The Liberation of Mother Goose* at BHTLF ("Billie Holiday Theatre: Season"; Aremu 22 Jan. 2012).

Fig. 4.2 Brewery Puppet Troupe performing “Crowtations” Act at unnamed festival produced by Harlem Children’s Theatre Company. 1980. Photo courtesy of Aduke Aremu.

HCTC was one of many companies which staged productions at BHTLF theatre; although productions by outside companies varied in form, archival research indicates that the majority focused on African American and African themes and cultures. For example, as a part of the Summer Theatre festival hosted by BHTLF in 1974, Theatre Black put up *A Hip Rumplestiltskin* by Black playwright Clay Goss described as a “rock-soul version of the fairy tale.” (“Clay Goss”; “Theatre Notes” 27 July 1974). [71] Also as a part of this festival, Empact Productions Youth Workshop performed *First Love* by Black playwright Charles Fuller, later known for his adult plays *Zooman and the Sign* and *A Soldier’s Play* (“Theatre Notes” 27 July 1974). [72] *First Love* used much profanity in telling what appears to be an adolescent love story. Also that year, BHTLF put up *Ghetto Corner* by Charles Kenyatta Richardson (“Cover story” D14). In 1975, the Little Shirley Chisholm Players performed Lucille Williams’s version of *Alice*

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[71]. This festival also offered a “creative dramatics” workshop, indicating the festival coordinators’ familiarity with mainstream Theatre for Youth terminology and practice (“Theatre Notes” 27 July 1974). “Creative dramatics,” or its contemporary moniker, “creative drama” refers to “an improvisation, non-exhibitional, process-centered form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect upon human experience…” (Davis and Evans 262).

[72]. Fuller became the second African American to win a Pulitzer for *A Soldier’s Play* in 1982 (Lopez).

in Wonderland ("Theatre Notes" 23 Apr. 1975 D4). [73] The next year's season ran an African-American Family Festival in July and in partnership with Columbia University hosted *Griot*, a "jazz musical production recommended for mature youngsters, teenagers, and their parents" ("Billie Holiday Theatre" 24 July 1976). BHTLF staged another family festival in 1976 in December, titled *African Family Festival* by Sombre Yembe of the Cameroons ("The Award Winning"). Goss's *Hip Rumplestiltskin* went up again in July of 1977; to the best of my knowledge, this is the only play that BHTLF put up twice ("Billie Holiday Theatre" 16 July 1977). Also in 1977, BHTLF ran a series in honor of Black History Month which included acts such as the Uhuru Sa Sa Shule Students Black pageant with the Seven principles of Blackness, African dancing and drumming, Zomar the Great with magic and puppets, The Oyenike Players of the Little Mecca Drama Group, The Dinizulu Drummers and Dancers in Concert, and another performance of *The Jackson Five Meet Malcolm X*, this time by the Brewery Puppet Troupe ("February Black").[74]

Music and dance performances took place at BHTLF quite often and occasionally featured children as performers for audiences of their peers. At least two musical offerings focused on Gospel music: a 1974 performance of the Tabernacle Children's Gospel Choir ("Theatre Notes" 23 Nov. 1974) and a "Children's Gospel Extravaganza" which featured a six-

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[73]. Shirley Chisholm was a Black congresswoman from Brooklyn who worked in Congress to secure arts funding for her constituents (see pages 114-115); her connection to this theatre company is unknown.

[74]. I do not consider this production to be a "play," which is the reason I state that *Hip Rumplestiltskin* was the only play to be put up twice.

year-old singer in an unknown year ("Billie Holiday Theatre: Season"). Some dance programs presented in 1974 were the Black Fire Dancers and the Weusi Kuumba African Dance Troupe ("Theatre Notes" 23 Nov. 1974; "The Afro-American"). In 1975, the Ken McPherson Dance Troupe's West Indian and African Children's program performed as did the Black Heritage Dancers ("Theatre Notes" 23 Apr. 1975). The Hamaski Zuri Dancers performed in 1976 and BHTLF staged the Wonder Love's Dance Program *A Salute to Stevie Wonder* ("The Award Winning"). Thirty-five children aged 9-17 danced for BHTLF as a part of the Marie Francoise Brooks Dance Research Theatre ("Billie Holiday Theatre" 12 Aug. 1978).

The Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk repertoire featured other types of performances as well which do not lend themselves easily to categorization. In this category fall the magic shows, a children's fashion show, Hispanic Children's Workshop and a "Special Holiday Production" by an Episcopal School ("Theatre for"; "Theatre Notes" 23 Nov. 1974; Lem 130; "The Award Winning"). In yet another example of children performing for other children, BHTLF held two "amateur shows," one in Mar. 1976 in which child participants auditioned and interviewed for entry, and one in August 1976 called the Super Stars of Tomorrow Talent Contest which offered prizes (Sealy B10; "Billie Holiday Theatre" 24 July 1976).

Although it is nearly impossible to determine what the children for whom the theatre's programming was designed thought about the variety of productions they attended, the writer of a 1974 *New York Times* article about BHTLF interviewed several children in the lobby of the theater to learn about their experience. The writer described the scene in which she interviewed the children as follows:

> As early as an hour before showtime [sic] at 2:30 pm on a recent Saturday, youngsters, mostly from the neighborhood, but also some who had come by bus, waited in the building's spacious, brick-floor lobby. A few adults were present, but mostly, the children, who ranged in age from two to 15 years old, snapped their fingers and swayed to the rhythmics of African music that filled the lobby. (Lem 130)

Of course the following statements should not be used to generalize about each child audience member's experience of BHTLF, but they can offer a window into how a handful of children received the theatre. Unfortunately, the reporter provides no title of the play the children attended. A 10-year-old girl said, "There's lots of dancing and singing and it makes you want to come back and see more. I go home and shut myself in the bathroom and sing" (qtd. in Lem 130). Another girl, this one age nine, stated, "I like the African tales. I don't understand their language, but I like the way it sounds" (Lem 130). A child whose gender was not provided spoke about the theater building itself: "It's the best place I've ever seen. It's clean and they [the adults] don't throw cigarettes on the floor" (Lem 130).

After successfully running the Theatre for Little Folk youth programming for several years, the Billie Holiday Theatre started a "children's workshop and resident company" known as the Billie Holiday Theatre Bubble Gum Players (BGP) in 1977 (BHT NYSCA Grant 1). In a grant application, the theatre stated that BGP included youth ages 6-17 years of age and admitted about 100 youths per session (BHT NYSCA Grant 2). However, an advertisement run in *Amsterdam News* for the program invited girls and boys up to the age of 19 for a "children's theatrical workshop," and described the program as running on weekdays, Saturdays and

Sundays at a cost of $5 to register ("The Bubble Gum" D7). Each session ran approximately 12-14 weeks and offered 10 different classes (BHT NYSCA Grant 2). Some of the classes offered included creative dramatics, yoga/acrobatics/karate (Y.A.K.), creative expression, acting I&II, African dance and modern dance ("Fall Registration" 37). Five instructors worked with the youth in the BGP workshop and wrote each participant an individualized evaluation based on their observations about the child's work throughout the course of the session (BHT NYSCA Grant 2). The child members of the BGP were chosen from participants in the workshop classes who displayed "exceptional talent and discipline" (BHT NYSCA Grant 8). These youth then auditioned to gain entry into the BGP resident company (BHT NYSCA Grant 2).

Brabham, like Aremu, believed that participation in theatre helped the youth participants academically: Brabham spoke of the positive results she had seen in increasing the reading scores of BGP participants: "All our children are now reading above their age level" (qtd. in Hazziezah D8). Furthermore, BGP members aged six-through-nine participated in a youth academic quiz competition in 1977 sponsored by Fanko, a community organization which created Fanko Academic Challenge to "address the consistently low levels of performance exhibited by even 'on level' minority students" ("Academic Quiz" B1). [75]

The Bubble Gum Players performed "one major production per year" (BHT NYSCA Grant 2). The group devised the first of these productions, *Bed Stuy Story* (1977), from class improvisations and based the content on "the aspirations of the children of this community" (BHT NYSCA Grant 2). The play debuted in November 1977 and ran for five Saturdays

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[75]. The group received second place in its age group ("Academic Quiz" B1).

("Dance, Art" D14). In the *Amsterdam News* advertisement for the play, three playwrights are listed but the children upon whose improvisational work *Bed Stuy* was based remain unnoted ("The Bed-Stuy Story"). Although little information is available about BGP's production history, the company put up at least three additional productions: *And the Sun God Said…That's Hip*, *Story Theatre*, and *The Me Nobody Knows* (BHT NYSCA Grant 2).

Little is available about the BGP *Sun God* production, but covering it here provides the reader with a clearer picture of the type of Afrocentric theater the group created. Some information about the production of *Sun God* is found in a 1981 grant application which describes the play as "an adaption of the story of the creation," (BHT NYSCA Grant 2). The play included elements of poetry, song, and dance and featured a company of 80 young performers ("And the Sun" D6). Lynette Valasco and Mikell Pinkney adapted the play from the children's poetry book of the same name by Ernest Gregg and O'Dell Padget composed its original music ("And the Sun" D6). The production ran five times in June of 1978 on weekends at a cost of three dollars per seat and five dollars for theatre parties ("And the Sun" D6).

An examination of the children's book upon which the production was based aides in assembling a picture of themes most likely addressed in the play. Written by Gregg and illustrated by G. Falcon Beazer in 1972, *And the Son God* speaks directly to children of color, addressing them as "you and me" (Gregg n. pag.). Gregg describes his intentions for the book: "I've tried to say to Black children that, 'yes,' we are the majority in the world, and 'yes,' we have to take control of our destiny" (qtd. in Spence "The Plight"). The author's inspiration lie in what he viewed as the total lack of "myths for Black children which connected them to their African homeland…, no literature which explained to them what Black adults were going

through in this country…" which he discovered while attending Sarah Lawrence College where he earned a Master's degree in Education (Spence "The Plight").

The book took the form of a story and unfolded through a loosely structured rhyme format written in a Black vernacular of the 1970s. Gregg stated that he used "rhythm, rhyme, and dialect (so) children can dance, sing and remember (the words)" (qtd. in Spece "The Plight"). Vibrant illustrations accompany the text; they contain high visual contrast of bright yellows against Black and blue backgrounds. These illustrations depict the male Sun God as well as images of people drawn to look Asian, African, Indian, Native American, and Polynesian: no white people appear in the book. The book's underlying purpose is to imbue children of color with the feeling of belonging to a privileged group: the group of people whose skins are Black, brown, yellow and red. The Sun God speaks directly to these groups throughout the story and tells them that they are "his people" and that "together you form a rainbow of Black," even if some of them look "near white" (Gregg n. pag.). The tone is celebratory as the Sun God says "Make em like me, let em reflect my rays" (Gregg n. pag.) Gregg also warns his young readership of racism and prejudice using strong language: "Some of y'all is goin to be called negro, nigra, nigger and colored too and some of y'all is goin to deny that you is you" (n. pag.). Whether the play version used such strong language or not remains a question; in any case, of note is that Gregg conceived of Black children as mature enough to understand such a difficult lesson. Gregg concludes his story with this message:

> But y'all is the Sun's rays
>
> and will reflect my ways
>
> for if you do that

y'all truly be Black,

now ain't that a fact? (n. pag.)

The emphasis on being "truly" Black harkens to the Black Aesthetic search for and concern with essential Blackness, one of the cornerstones of the Black Arts Movement. One is left to wonder the extent to which BHTLF focused on Black essentialism in its production.

The theatre company's choice to stage a version of the story is particularly interesting given the controversy surrounding the book itself: Gregg believed the publishers improperly promoted the book by neglecting to market it to Black institutions and the institutions to which it was sent reviewed it negatively (Spence "The Plight"). Even New York Public Library's Office of Children's Services called the book "racist" and "unfit for children"; Gregg stated that the organization was "opposed to the whole concept of Black people being created first" and Spence reported that Gregg believed the book's "obvious omission of whites was the crux of the matter and the real reason for the library's misgivings" (Spence "The Plight).

The second play in the Bubble Gum Players' repertoire is the surprising choice of Paul Sills's *Story Theatre*. What is especially interesting about the company's choice to stage this work is that Sills, was the son of Viola Spolin, an instructor of improvisation who is well-known in the field of mainstream Theatre for Youth because of her work using improvisation with children. [76] Both Spolin and Sills are white. *Story* recounts selected "modernized" Brothers

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[76]. Spolin's books *Improvisation for the Theatre* (1963) and *Theatre Games for the Classroom* (1986) influenced many practitioners of Theatre for Youth and both remain in print.

Grimm fairytales as well as a handful of Aesop's fables.[77] In 1970, *Story* opened on Broadway and experienced a long run because of its "well-known folk and fairy tales…woven together in an imaginative format which delighted audiences of all ages" (McCaslin, *Theatre for Children* 300). After its closing, the script became available for the use of other theatre groups (McCaslin *Theatre for Children* 300). Thus, at least in this instance, the repertoire of BHTLF resembles that of mainstream Theatre for Youth in the early 1970s. At the Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk, Laurine Towler and Phil Cochren produced an adaption of the play which ran for six performances in December 1979 and was marketed as "a children's holiday special" ("Paul Sills'" 26). The play was clearly aimed at Black children as the advertisement which appeared in *Amsterdam News* depicts African American children as fairy tale characters (See fig. 4.3) ("Paul Sills" 26). Many of the familiar tales featured the themes of trickery, pursuit of wealth or power, violence, and outwitting one's enemies. The version of "Henny-Penny," the chicken who believed that the sky was falling and set off to tell the king, is the only overtly political tale in *Story*. In Sills's version, the story's action is juxtaposed with music criticizing the Vietnam War with lyrics such as: "Gotta go out and get those reds, The only good commie is one that's dead," and "Be the first one on your block to have your son come home in a box" (Sills 35, 36).

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[77]. *Story Theatre* played on Broadway from Oct. 1970-July 1971 for 243 performances (*Paul Sills Story Theatre*).

A CHILDREN'S HOLIDAY SPECIAL

The Billie Holiday Theatre
Bubble Gum Players
(Resident Youth Company)

Presents

Paul Sills' STORY THEATRE

Adapted by
Laurine Towler and Phil Cochren

Directed By
Laurine Towler

Lighting Design and Special Effects By
Tim Phillips

Production Stage Manager
Avan Littles

Production Supervision and Design By
Felix E. Cochren

Thursday, December 27 .... 1 P.M.
Friday, December 28 .... 1 P.M.
Saturday, December 29 .... 1 P.M.
5 P.M.
Sunday, December 30 .... 3 P.M.
7 P.M.

For tickets and information call:

Billie Holiday Theatre
1368 Fulton Street
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11216

Box Office 636-0919
$2.00 Children
$4.00 Adults

This production is made possible with funds from the National Endowment of the Arts. The Billie Holiday Theatre is a member of the Black Theatre Alliance.

Designed by LaVon D. Leak

ALL PERFORMANCES at THE EUBIE BLAKE AUDITORIUM
in TOMPKINS PARK (corner of Tompkins & Marcy Avenues)

Fig. 4.3. Ad of Paul Sills's *Story Theatre* by Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk. 1979. Reprinted with permission from *New York Amsterdam News.*

Because I have not been able to examine the script used by the BGP, it remains unknown whether the BHTLF audiences were exposed to this particular political message.

The last play in the known repertoire of BGP was a version of *The Me Nobody Knows.* Originally a book of stories and poetry written by impoverished New York City children collected by an elementary school teacher Stephen M. Joseph and published in 1969, *The Me Nobody Knows* became adapted into a musical by Robert H. Livingston and Herb Schapiro with music by Gary William Friedman and lyrics by Will Holt (*The Me Nobody Knows*).[78] As written, the cast featured eight Black and four white children portraying various characters without a centralized plot. *New York Times* theatre critic Clive Barnes reviewed the original production which opened Off-Broadway at the Orpheum Theater in 1970 and praised the musical for its honest portrayal of New York City, "the New York nobody wants to remember" (Barnes 42). Barnes describes the production's content:

> There is no story, of course—rather, it is a picture of a place and a time. There are 12 children—old children, rich in poverty, only just winning over life—and they talk and sing about this and that. About birds, about drugs, about being Black. Mostly they talk and sing about being alone and trying to reach not just the world outside but also the world inside. The language is plain and blunt—the music bluesey and attractive. (42)

[78]. *The Me Nobody Knows* also ran on Broadway from Dec. 1970-Nov. 1971 for 378 performances (*The Me Nobody Knows*).

Selections from the score indicate that the musical tackles issues such as racism and poverty head on. For example, the song “Black” questions the violence inflicted upon people of color because of their skin color: “Does white they cry cause Black we die. Why they kill me what crime you and me, oh yes Now I see Black!” (Holt 3-4). “Black” focuses on the value of freedom and the freedom to come for Black Americans as the phrase “Black is our color and we gonna be free” repeats thirteen times (Holt 4-5). In “If I Had a Million” a child fantasizes about what he or she would do with a million dollars and the plans include throwing a big party, spending on extravagant possessions, and buying wine for people on welfare (Holt 15). Lyrics in the song imply a link between material wealth and power: The child perceives that if he or she had wealth there would be no need to take “bullshit” from anyone: “Not from the man and not from you” (Holt 16). Here we also see the belief that wealthy people do not suffer from racism or racial oppression from “the man,” meaning white patriarchal culture. Also, the profanity present here sets this score apart from that which would have been considered appropriate for white child audiences in the early 1970s. [79] The reality of urban life is portrayed in the song “Sounds” which describes sounds heard in the city at night such as “rock sounds, street sounds,…a trash sound a smash sound…a wood against the head sound” (Holt 31-32). The violence of much of the sounds mentioned in the song reflects the gritty surroundings of the children’s impoverished inner city neighborhoods.

The Billie Holiday Theatre Summer Children’s Series first produced the play in 1981 but it became so successful that it was included in the theatre’s regular season (“Bubble Gum” 36).

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[79]. Interestingly, the score provides an alternate lyric for “bullshit” with the word “nothin’” which can easily be substituted, depending on the director’s wishes (Holt 16).

In September 1981 the play opened again at BHT with a cast ranging in age from 11-19; an article about the production described it as a "musical production…adapted from the writings of inner city young people and [it] focuses on their hopes and frustrations" ("Bubble Gum" 36). Tichina Arnold, a professional actress who is best known for her work as Chris Rock's mother on the television program *Everybody Hates Chris* (2005-2009), was cast in the Sept. 1981 production ("Young Actors" 31).

Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk's rich variety of performance offerings for children evidenced here shows that Brabham, the program coordinator, did more than merely pay lip service to exposing young people to different types of artistic experiences. Although specific demographic information about the numbers of children who benefited from the theatre's youth programming are unknown, based on the number of advertisements and coverage of productions in *Amsterdam News*, it is safe to assume that the program provided scores of Brooklyn-area children access to low-cost productions they otherwise would not have experienced. Special attention was paid not only to providing different types of aesthetic experiences for these primarily Black child audiences, but also to creating theatre with and for Black children through the Bubble Gum Players which reflected and celebrated their lived experiences.

Chapter 5

Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre and Amiri Baraka's Spirit House and their Theatre for Youth programs

"You cannot have a theatre without an ideology, without a base from which all of the forms must emanate and call it Black, for it will be the same as Western theatre, conventional theatre, safe theatre" (Teer, qtd. in Harris 39).

Liberation of self and of other Black Americans were passions of Barbara Ann Teer, the founder of the National Black Theatre. Teer came to Harlem in the early 1960s to teach dance at Wadleigh Junior High School while she studied acting (Weber B6; Thomas 40). Her dedication to the education, or to use Teer's preferred term, "liberation" of others would come through in every aspect of NBT, including the school she established there called the Children's School for the Development of Intuitive and God-Conscious Thought, or DIG (Faison 23 Oct. 2011). The school, its theatrical components, and other children's programming by NBT comprise a large part of this chapter. [80] The second part addresses Theatre for Youth activities and the elementary school established at another Pan-African theatrical institution: Amiri Baraka's Spirit House in Newark, New Jersey. Unlike the limited coverage Teer's theatrical contributions and legacy have received in the academy, scholars have devoted much attention to documenting Amiri Baraka's theatrical career and influence as one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement. Rather than repeating what others have studied, my coverage of Baraka's contributions intends to zero in on

[80]. For a thorough study of National Black Theatre and its programs for adults, see Dr. Lundeana Thomas's 1993 dissertation *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre: Transformational Forces in Harlem* or the book by the same name, published in 1997 by Garland, Inc.

the ideological construction of the child at Spirit House by examining the theatrical work with youth accomplished there and at Afrikan Free School, the organization's primary school. I give attention to how both the National Black Theatre and Spirit House organizations functioned though a Pan-Africanist framework with religious influences to produce strikingly different conceptions of the Black child made manifest in their youth theatre productions.

Before detailing Theatre for Youth activities at NBT, however, it is essential to lay the groundwork about the company as a Black cultural institution heavily invested in using theatre as a means to affect positive transformation of Black people. Teer's theatrical trajectory included work in mainstream white theatre and involvement with the Black Arts Movement through Black theatre; dissatisfaction with both genres persuaded her to create a theatre specifically for Blacks designed to empower, enlighten, and ultimately transform their lives. [81] Teer founded the National Black Theatre (NBT) in Harlem in 1968 after becoming disenchanted with the kinds of roles she had played as a professional Black actor, despite having received critical acclaim and awards for her theatrical work (Best D10). She felt frustrated with the roles Black playwrights wrote for women, describing them as "unsympathetic" and "often degrading" (Gent 40). The founder explained how Black men's views about women translated into negative onstage depictions: "Men don't know how to behave toward women, don't understand us as sensitive human beings. They're always portraying us as prostitutes, who slink ridiculously around the stage, or as hateful people. That's why I've created my own theater" (qtd. in Gent 40). It is noteworthy that NBT had the status of being the only institution of Black Theatre to emerge from

[81]. Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, and Robert MacBeth were contemporaries of Teer in the Black Theatre arm of BAM.

BAM which was headed and founded by a Black woman (Mbowa 15). The roles that Teer took and with which she felt dissatisfied came to be a product of the Black Arts Movement. Mbowa writes about the depiction of Black women during BAM: “The Black male playwright who subscribed to a Black Nationalist ideology during the 1960s and 1970s produced plays that limited and disempowered Black women” (16). Larry Neal describes that in prior decades in Black American literature “the strong Black mother was the object of awe and respect” and believed that in BAM, the mother’s status had transformed, becoming “ambivalent and laced with tension” (66).

In a videotaped interview, Teer spoke critically about the form much of Black theatre used during BAM, which she surmised as being in the “Western thrust of theatre” and criticized Black theatre’s focus on and constant portrayal of negativity (“Conversation”). Teer explained how NBT sought to “change the total thrust [of theatre] so we would be viewing Blackness from a positive point of view” (“Conversation”). Thomas writes, “[Teer] shared the pain felt by many Blacks of the 1960s, but she refused to let it turn into hate as many others did. She felt that this negativism would destroy Black hope” (xx).

Teer trained professionally with Sanford Meisner and with Robert Hooks co-founded the Group Theatre Workshop, the predecessor to the Negro Ensemble Company (Lewis 73-74). She left the group because, in her words,

> My philosophy was that we should not be called Negroes. And we should not be located in Greenwich Village. I didn’t want to prove to white people that I could do their western art form as good as they could. (qtd. in Thomas 42-43)

Her transition from actor to director and educator was relatively easy because her family was filled with educators and she felt it was "natural" for her to desire to teach others (Lewis 73). During her time with the Workshop she taught and directed teenagers: This experience led to her realization that the methods of acting she had learned did not work for this population. She stated, "The Stanislavsky Method that I was learning was totally irrelevant to these kids who came out of the streets" (Teer qtd. in Lewis 74). Teer became convinced a new form of acting was needed which would embrace rather than reject African American characteristics of speech, movement, and music.

Like some proponents of the Black Arts Movement, Teer abandoned European-American conceptions of theatrical art and felt strongly that Black Americans needed to create a new "Black Art Standard" ("New Group" 23). [82] "Africanisms" needed to be used as the basis for this new theatre. Thomas describes Africanisms as "cultural artifacts, like speech, music, and dance that survived the infamous middle passage" (5). As reported by Harris, the theatre's new art standard required all of its productions, in what seems to be a diminishing order of importance, to 1) raise consciousness, 2) address political issues, 3) educate with "knowledge and truth", 4) explain the reasons for negative community realities in order to eradicate them, and 5) "Lastly, it must entertain" (39). Simply put, NBT productions were didactic, and unapologetically so.

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[82]. Teer often spoke critically about Western society and Western theatre. One of her many critiques was that the Western system of values had to do with surfaces and appearances, rather than essences and spirit (Johnson 44).

The National Black Theatre, like other theatres to emerge during BAM, focused on Black self-sufficiency and Black identity (Faison 23 Oct. 2011). Like other Black activists who ascribed to Pan-Africanist beliefs in the late 1960s, Teer chose to reclaim the word "Black" and imbue it with positive connotations. Teer recognized the power language held to influence self-conceptions. An example of this reclamation of language is evidenced in a 1969 interview wherein Teer said, "We hope that our theatre group will begin to influence other Black Theatre groups across the country, because we have created a whole new Black Art blackly" ("New Group" 23). Here "blackly" serves not only to describe the self-identified race of people who originated the new form, but also to provide an alternative, positive meaning to the traditional definition of "blackly" associated with gloom, anger, and wickedness. The reclaiming of the word "Black" in various incarnations continued under Teer's leadership and is explored later in this chapter.

Thomas writes that through NBT, Teer presented a "new paradigm arising from a discourse of self-empowerment and self-determination" (38). NBT members ascribed to essentialist beliefs about Blacks; Teer believed Blacks were inherently a spiritual people (Johnson 44). Although many proponents of BAM ideology also essentialized Black men and Black women in order to define the roles of each sex, i.e. Black woman as subservient to Black man, there is no evidence that NBT essentialized in this manner (Mbowa 20-21). NBT differed from other BAM theatres in other areas as well. Teer created the new "Black Art Standard" in a way that no other group had attempted: the acting system she conceptualized, known as the Five Cycles of Evolution, originated in the lived experiences of Black Americans (Harris 40). As Harris points out,

> As the Black experience in America is quite different from the white one, Black actors are frequently asked to play roles that have nothing to do with the basic reality of their lives. This may seem to be a contradiction but Stanislavski's ‘as if’ does not always work for Black actors in these times. (40)

Well before the group began to put up productions Teer ran her theatre like a workshop in order to perfect this new acting style. In 1969 Teer explained her working methodology:

> Black Theatre cannot accept or copy white theatre models and guidelines because they don’t satisfy the needs of Black people. What we need to do and are doing is to create our own Black models based on the already existing rich Black lifestyle before we begin to perform plays. (qtd. in “New Group” 23)

Black actors, or “liberators” as they were called at NBT, needed to first go through a process known as “decrudin” wherein each individual “purified” him or herself by exploring their core beliefs (Harris 41). Teer explained the reason for the process, “Only after a person has been decruded can they clearly see the tremendous task Black artists have cut out for themselves” (qtd. in “New Group” 23). In the Cycles, the actor moves through five different “types” of Black personalities, beginning with The Nigger, moving then to The Negro, next The Militant, followed by The Nationalist before finally arriving at The Revolutionary (Harris 41-42). Each stage is unique and involves movement from materialistic and individualistic values toward valuing spirituality and the Black collective (Harris 42). The stages involve a transition from emulation of white Americans, to hating them, to acceptance and love for Black people (Harris 42). As Teer described the most evolved, Revolutionary stage, “You know who you are, what

you have to do, and you simply go about quietly doing it" (qtd. in Harris 42). Teer stopped her development of the stages at Revolutionary because as she explained, "It was at the peak of the Civil Rights Movement and there was no place to go, everybody was either in jail or dead or in exile and it was like, what do you do now?" ("Conversation").

The Cycles were based the idea is that these internal changes must take place in each individual liberator before the external changes would be able to be portrayed effectively (Harris 42). Harris writes that all NBT productions, called "rituals" and "revivals" use the Cycles as their base:

> All of the characters are representative of the people of the Harlem community. The characters can move either up or down the vertical standard of the five cycles. In most cases, the progress is positive, for Ms. Teer's theatre is about nation building. (42) [83]

What made a liberator effective was not his or her ability to entertain an audience, rather it was his or her capacity to inspire the spectators "toward an awareness of self" ("New Group" 23). A

[83]. Other Black theatre companies of the era called their productions rituals, but to much less success than NBT's rituals. For example, Ed Bullins wrote rituals for the New Lafayette Theatre. Thomas described Bullins's rituals as having unwieldy titles and failing to interest their audiences (26). Robert Macbeth's New Lafayette Theatre also performed rituals which Larry Neal described as "failures of energy…when ideology is removed from the rhythms and vigor of the people on whom it is based, it becomes self-defeating and cannot be made into meaningful images and gestures" (qtd. in Jeyifous 44).

liberator's success, then, aligned with the first tenet of the Black Art Standard, consciousness raising.

One of NBT's goals was the transformation of Black people's lives, "thereby getting them in touch with their experience of perfection"; NBT's popularity and community support attested to the draw of this message of transformation (Best D10). NBT members initially numbered 18 and within six months the company had grown to 50 with a waiting list ("New Group" 23). Harlem Congressman Charles Rangel applauded NBT in 1975 calling it "one of the most valuable, worthwhile and exciting programs in our community" as well as a "positive force in Harlem asking people indirectly to confront their own lives and celebrating constantly the achievements and experience of Black writers, artists and scholars" (qtd. in Best D10). NBT served as a welcoming environment for Blacks who wanted to learn about theatre because participation required no previous theatrical experience. Company members included "bus drivers, artists, engineers, secretaries, biochemists, students, musicians, teachers, counselors" (Best D10). In addition to its inclusivity, part of its popularity may be due to the way Teer structured the company based on the idea of the Black family unit. Harris explains,

> As members of the same family, the negative aspects of Western theatre are virtually eliminated for the performers as they each have areas of specialization, as well as freedom to experiment. Sound technicians act. Actors build sets. Lighting people dance. There is total cooperation in all phases of her theatre. (40)

Another factor in the theatre's long-term success is that unlike other, often short-lived Black theatre companies to emerge from the Black Arts Movement (Baraka's Black Arts Repertory

Theatre and School is one example) one of the tenets of the NBT philosophy involved authentic engagement with the Harlem community in which it was located. [84] NBT members used questionnaires initially to "survey the predispositions of their prospective audience, to find out everything they could about their adopted community"; members first conducted research at churches of varying denominations, then at bars, next at revivals (Lewis 77). Not only did they want to learn about the Harlem community members, but also they desired to learn the community's aesthetics by studying the singing at churches and the performers at Harlem's Apollo Theatre (Lewis 77).

In a 1971 interview for *Essence* magazine, Teer admitted that in many ways NBT emulated "the Church":

> There was a time when the Black Church satisfied all the spiritual, social, cultural, economic, and recreational needs of our people. As a matter of fact, we see ourselves as being more in the vein of a church rather than a theatre, and we are attempting to provide an alternative for those people who can no longer go to the Black Church because of its ideology. (qtd. in Harris 77) [85]

In an interview six years earlier, Teer clarified the difference for her between the activities of NBT and the Black church. She stated

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[84]. Thomas cites a newspaper article wherein NBT was recognized as being one of ten remaining Black theatres in New York City as of 1989; in 1970, over 112 existed (xxi).

[85]. Teer personally felt no need to attend Christian church because the emphasis there was on outside forces, rather than on getting in touch with one's internal power (Johnson 44).

> We are developing a style here—through love, meditation, fasting, and respect—to fill our minds, our lives with positive thoughts. It has nothing to do with the formal church, with external things. Religion must be so much a part of life that you don't even have to use the word to express the idea. (qtd. in Johnson 44)

Despite the ideological differences between NBT and Black Christianity, NBT based much of its aesthetic principles on the liberators' observations of what happened at Black churches during services. Black Pentecostal churches influenced NBT's style to such a degree because Teer believed that "Blackness" was most clearly expressed in those locales (Johnson 44). Teer defined Blackness as a spiritual value measurable by the extent to which Black people felt free (Johnson 44). Teer also had visited African countries and spent quite a bit of time in Oshogbo, Nigeria with the Yoruba people, funded by a Ford Foundation grant (Thomas 59). She found numerous similarities between elements of Black Pentecostal worship in Harlem and African rituals, particularly in dance, chanting, music, and rhythms of preaching (Thomas 60).[86] Thomas writes, "It is no coincidence that African ceremonies and Black Holiness-Pentecostal services both

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[86]. Pentecostalism can be defined as churches which adhere to the beliefs of spirit baptism, one of the signs in which this can manifest is speaking in tongues (Thomas 47). Thomas traces Black Pentecostalism back to slavery and notes that upon being freed, former slaves chose to remain in their churches rather than attend what were previously all white churches (47-48). The services at the Black churches were emotional affairs: Thomas writes, "Freed slaves…were attracted to these 'holiness churches,' finding solace in the uninhibited expression which was not far from African experiences they had known or heard in the stories of their ancestors" (48).

involve sacred dance, spirit possession (called 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' within Black Holiness Pentecostalism), call-and-response liturgy, and glossolalia" (54). [87]

Reeducation of African Americans "to restore spirituality and a cultural tradition that has been stripped from Blacks in America" was another NBT goal (Harris 40). In many sources, Teer attested to NBT's commitment to spirituality and God-Conscious Art without tying her definition of God to any one religion. She said, "Religion…should help you believe in yourself, because you know what you are—then you have to love others because we all have godliness in us" (Johnson 44). In an interview with Abisola Faison, Teer's long-time assistant at NBT, Faison emphasized the spiritual, secular aspects of the theatre company and the Children's School (23 Oct. 2011). The spirituality integral to every part of the company was called "God-Conscious Art." [88] Shirley Faison, current Executive Director of NBT explained what this term meant at a Sept. 2011 panel discussion at Brown University. She stated:

> First of all, in order to understand God-Conscious Art you have to take God out of the sky and put God inside you, so God-Conscious Art is art that comes from

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[87]. Thomas defines glossolalia as "a form of 'speaking in tongues'' in which a worshipper repeats words such as "Jesus" or "Yes" "over and over, faster and faster, until it develops into nonsensical utterances. This suppression of rational thought, a kind of self-induced trance, is regarded as a private conversation between the worshipper and his [sic] God" (55).

[88]. Thomas writes, "Teer defined God Conscious Art as one which produces an overwhelming creative force and energy that spontaneously swells from within. Its purpose is to build entrepreneurial artists to provide community-based positive leadership" (38).

> within, that comes from that overwhelming creative force that is within you. ("Conversation")

At the panel discussion, Teer's daughter and current CEO of NBT, Sade Lythcott, clarified God-Conscious Art's emphasis on spiritual energy. Lythcott said:

> I would also say it has to do with spirit. As my mother [Teer] evolved…culture was always important, but spirit became important too, so that the commonality of all of us is that we are a spirit people, and that spirit is energy. Energy cannot be created, it just transforms, so if we can get in touch with that vibratory frequency that makes you feel healed or healthy or inspired, then we're doing our jobs and so that's the place, the source that we call God-Conscious. […] So we don't define God from a religious standpoint, we define it from an energetic standpoint. ("Conversation")

From the reviews of NBT's rituals and revivals published in *Amsterdam News* and the *New York Times*, the vibratory frequency Lythcott spoke of was made manifest at NBT functions. In a mixed review wherein Neal described the texts of Teer's rituals as "unimportant and corny," he described the energy of NBT as "extraordinary—proved by the fact that they played the Apollo Theatre, successfully" (qtd. in Jeyifous 44). In the ritual format, liberators always in role and audience members freely interacted before, during, and after the production thusly destroying the Western theatrical convention of the fourth wall (Harris 42-43). Harris elaborates on the exchanges between cast and audience members: "The actors at times sit with the audience, and the spectators in turn play ball, dance, drink, and eat with the actors. The

interchange is total. No restrictions are placed on either group" (43). The rituals' aesthetic qualities and the design of the performance space helped further facilitate participation by audiences; rituals invoked a "call-and-response" tradition and the stage resembled a theatre-in-the-round (Harris 43). NBT wanted to inspire a feeling of *communitas* at its performances. Lewis writes, "Teer's theatre is ritualistic and communal, designed not to maintain divisions and distinctions between people, but to erase them" (77). Thomas notes that Yoruba culture, Pentecostal worship and performances at NBT all feature "communion, or the absorption of the self into a larger community through the suppression of reason and the stimulations of deeper centers of awareness and attention" (62).

The NBT productions incorporated a combination of African ceremonies, movement, music, dance, song and poetry (Best D10). These elements abounded in NBT performances and were united in an effortless fashion, "thought of in the African sense," wherein music and other art forms are seen as integral to life and not as separate from it (Harris 40). Elmo Terry-Morgan described at length how African American art retains its connection to Africa:

> The cumulative history of African Americans represents a resistance to external pressure which, much like coal compressed into a diamond, resulted in a living, energized culture that harmonizes with the cosmos and forces of nature and generates cycles of Soulful expressions. These cultural expressions are articulated by Black artists who exude a vitality, precision, and intelligence that are globally and historically unique. *In this Africanic cultural tradition, Art is not segregated from the overall flow of life; it is an integral part of the human experience.* (my emphasis, 680)

Education of community members at NBT was not limited to the rituals. The "Blackening Program" workshops and theatre performances, also known as "Blackenings," originally took place on Sunday afternoons with NBT staff members and a guest speaker to provide "warm" communication between the speakers and attendees (Best D10). The events attracted such lauded individuals as Stokely Carmichael, Nikki Giovanni, Ruby Dee, Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Maya Angelou and dance companies Rod Rodgers, George Faison, and Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of Harlem (Best D10; Thomas 116). NBT offered performance workshops for adults including Liberation-Acting, Ritual-Playwriting, Evolutionary Movement-Dance, Vocal Projection, and The Body—A Miracle Machine, ("Natl. Black" 22; Best D10). Workshops aimed at community members also featured personal growth and enrichment topics, such as Meditation and Spiritual Release, Man-Woman Relationships, Men's Rap Room, Women's Rap Room, and a three-day seminar led by Teer called "Live Out the Life of Oppression" in 1975 (Best D10; Thomas 104). In 1980 NBT led a workshop series called "Joy of Performing" which was led by professional artists and producers, such as Hattie Winston, Dan Fauci, Teer, and Woodie King, Jr. ("Professionals").

Like the other companies discussed in this study (Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk being the exception), children's programming at NBT took the form of Theatre for Youth rather than Theatre for Young Audiences: children created theatre with adults at NBT, the company did not put up shows for child audiences. Theatrical work with youth occurred as a part of programming aimed at two populations. One group served was very young children of the NBT staff, aged 3-6 years, who attended the daily preschool/daycare program "Children's School for

the Development of Intuitive and God-Conscious Thought" or DIG (Faison 23 Oct. 2011). [89] The full-time center offered care for at least twelve hours per day (Thomas 115). As the staff's children aged, DIG transformed into an afterschool program that attracted other neighborhood children (Faison 23 Oct. 2011). [90] Other programming took the form of workshops aimed at slightly older children from the Harlem area; the Saturday morning workshops were aimed at those aged 6-9 years, while some weekday afterschool workshops took place for children 5-10 years old ("Theatrical School" 19; "Professionals Lead"). During the summers, NBT expanded its programming for children (Faison 23 Oct. 2011). Like its adult programs, NBT approached the youth programming from a highly philosophical and spiritual standpoint, grounded in the belief that "Education is about that which is within" (qtd. by Faison 23 Oct. 2011). Faison also believed that children benefited from the program because "doing plays and creative arts and crafts prepared them for another way of looking at life" (23 Oct. 2011).

Faison described the school's rationale: "Culture is the basis of everything. The whole concept of the school was to develop human beings to be fully aware of their potential" and that "the whole Black Arts Movement was about our right to be full, whole human beings; the school was out of that philosophy" (23 Oct. 2011). Faison explained the school's approach to culturally-specific education:

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[89]. Some children attended DIG whose parents did not work at NBT (Faison 23 Oct. 2011).

[90]. Faison said that the contrast between the behavior of the children who attended DIG in their preschool years versus the behavior of the children in the neighborhood who did not attend was like "night and day" (23 Oct. 2011).

> The big problem of the African American community is that they are not being educated to maintain their sense of self, their connection to Africa, and to their ancestors. They don't have a sense of who they are, and it's very important for them [to know this] to being a *person* in the world. (23 Oct. 2011)

Faison articulated that the school was not "anti-white," but it did focus on a specific cultural perspective (23 Oct. 2011). This cultural perspective was Pan-African in nature. She contrasted DIG's approach to education with that of other single-race or single-religion schools of the time:

> Most schools for Black children have strict dogma of behavior and dress. The Muslim schools are doing the same things as what a Jewish school is doing, it just looks Black but it hasn't broken out of having people emulate a certain standard of beauty and culture. (23 Oct. 2011)

NBT created the preschool because staff members wanted their children to be homeschooled, but in an organized educational and cultural environment (Faison 23 Oct. 2011).[91]

Faison said that the first step to having an education is about discovering one's identity, and that "All of our young people had that education before they went to public school" (23 Oct. 2011). Part of the reasoning behind the desire to homeschool, or keep the children close to NBT, was the parents' and other staff members' understanding of how negative perceptions and expectations of people of color could insidiously and inaccurately affect a person's self-perception. Faison said, "Many children are affected by having a negative self-identity,

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[91]. In the book based on her dissertation about NBT, Thomas described the preschool as a community service project because it was open to Harlem residents (115).

especially when they are of color, before they even get to school" (23 Oct. 2011). Thomas writes, "What Black people—and children especially—saw and heard, they often believed, and the images of Blacks that stage, film, radio, and television offered them were usually stereotypes: the mammy, the simpleton, the savage, and the Christian servant" (28). No television viewing was permitted at the school and Faison said that the children "were not brought up by it" (23 Oct. 2011). This decision seems consistent with the NBT philosophy of "decrudin:" in order for the children to get in touch with their experience of "perfection," they should avoid putting the "crud" in from the outside world in the first place.

DIG received support from several organizations which allowed it to thrive and grow. One supporter was the Lilly Endowment which granted NBT $85,000 to start the school (Faison 23 Oct. 2011). In 1981 the school moved to the Dunleavy Millbank Community Center in Harlem and had by that point grown from preschool-only to providing preschool through second grade education ("NBT Children's" 46). The Children's Aid Society housed the school at Millbank where the facilities included a swimming pool and gym for the school's use ("NBT Children's" 46).

As of 1981, DIG's curriculum included basic skills such as reading, writing, and math "integrated with creative communication activities, i.e. storytelling, mythology, history of culture, theatre arts, meditation, dance, music, language, yoga, gymnastics, and martial arts" ("NBT Children's" 46). Teer designed the DIG program but did not teach in it (Faison 23 Oct. 2011). Faison spoke about how DIG was inspired by Teer's philosophies about creativity, community, and taking responsibility for the community (23 Oct. 2011). DIG teachers focused on meditation which helped the school reach one of its goals: to teach children to explore one's

world through coming from within one's self (23 Oct. 2011). All of the DIG instructors had backgrounds in education and Vivian Hooks Rosmini, an early childhood educator who specialized in learning through meditation and the arts, headed the program ("Professionals Lead"; Faison 23 Oct. 2011). The teachers wanted the children to learn how to find contentment from within and often encouraged children to "take a journey," which meant being quiet with one's self (Faison 23 Oct. 2011). Through this centered place the children, like the adults at NBT, would focus on the creation of God-Conscious Art (Faison 23 Oct. 2011). Rosmini said, "We work from the inside out in order to release the hidden potential within students from preschool through second grade" (qtd. in "NBT Children's" 46). The children also engaged in social learning opportunities. One such activity the child attendees experienced was frequent field trips (Faison 23 Oct. 2011). The children once traveled from New York City to Seattle on a bus with their teachers, a trip which Faison described as being planned partially for the educational goal of "learning what it is to be in a group and take care of each other" (23 Oct. 2011).[92] Focusing on the importance of the group and group membership reflects the Pan-African concept of valuing the group over the individual. NBT's focus on the good of the "Black collective" is also evident here.

With the help of their teachers, the DIG preschool students conceived of original theatrical productions in which they performed; unfortunately very little information is available about these productions. What is known is that the very young children had a high degree of agency in the creation of these productions (Faison 23 Oct. 2011). A short clip in an undated

[92]. I contacted Faison numerous times to clarify the purpose of this extended field trip. Faison never responded to my inquiries.

news report about NBT recorded a rehearsal of one production, *When the Lion Roars*. In the video ten very young Black children, the youngest appearing to be about three years of age, clap and stomp their feet rhythmically while reciting lines such as "Join us…come waste an hour or two…A Journey, a journey to inspire…" ("Conversation").[93] About the production Faison said, "*When the Lion Roars* was not about Black or white, it was about having stories that empower children. It's about children standing up for themselves" (23 Oct. 2011) Faison reported that another production put on by the DIG students took Black history as its theme and focused on portraying famous Blacks, many of whom were teachers (23 Oct. 2011). The children collaborated to create these productions, which served to "tell their stories, a story of yourself, how things affected you" (Faison 23 Oct. 2011).

In addition to the preschool and early elementary school, Saturday morning workshops for children took place throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. "Children's Liberation School" programming (also called the "Children's Creative Workshop" and "Children's Creative Expression") offered the opportunity to experiment with arts and crafts, movement, songs, and games (Best D10; "National Black").[94] Begun in 1970, the Saturday school held dance classes and "Black mythology taught through creative dramatics" ("Theatrical School" 19). As in the children's programming at the Billie Holiday Theatre, the usage of the term "creative dramatics" indicates the instructors' familiarity with mainstream Theatre for Youth terminology in

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[93]. These were the only lines discernible in the recording; a reporter speaks over the rest of the children's lines. My contacts at NBT were unable to provide me with the original script, videorecording, or additional production materials.

[94]. Not to be confused with the daily DIG preschool program.

circulation during this era. At least in its first year, the Saturday school children created and showed their own "ritual," using the same name as NBT performances for adults ("Natl. Black" 22). No other information is available about this theatrical work nor am I able to determine if in other years the children's program culminated in rituals generated by children.

In 1980, a children's program offered for 5-10 year olds was an eight-week "Meditation and Theatre Arts" class offered afterschool Monday-Friday from 3:30-5:30 pm designed to "nurture the natural creativity of children" ("Professionals Lead"). Rosmini led the class which broached the topics of production, technical theatre skills, performance, scenery, costumes, props, cooking, music, stage presence, storytelling, folklore and meditation ("Professionals Lead"). At the end of this course as well, children were to perform a theatre presentation ("Professionals Lead").

Faison spoke extensively about the positive, long-lasting effects the DIG experience had on the children it served. Because she had several nephews who attended DIG while she worked at NBT as Teer's assistant, she said "I could experience first-hand what kind of exceptional human beings they [DIG attendees] became" (23 Oct. 2011). According to Faison, all of the children who attended the school became artistic in some way and were able to create the life they wanted: "Whatever career they have chosen, they are happy about it. They have created their own vocations" (23 Oct. 2011). Many became successful adults; some became MBAs and graduated from Harvard and Yale (Faison 23 Oct. 2011). One graduate of DIG who attained success in the entertainment field is Abisola Faison's nephew and Shirley Faison's son, actor Donald Faison, who played the character of Dr. Christopher Turk ("Turk") on the television series "Scrubs" (2001-2010) (Faison 23 Oct. 2011).

Like National Black Theatre, Baraka's Spirit House served many functions, one of which was as a theatre with resident company Spirit House Movers and Players. Spirit House, founded in 1966, served as a gathering place for Blacks in the Newark neighborhood to discuss politics; those who met there were primarily men (Steler; Watts 356). The group began with the name United Brothers and later served as a basis for the Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN) (Watts 356).[95] Where NBT's Pan-African philosophies and practices came directly from Yoruba culture and indirectly from Black Pentecostal traditions, Baraka rooted his Pan-Africanism in Black Muslim beliefs and practices, based on the American belief system of Kawaida.[96]

Self-determination for Blacks as a goal existed for both NBT and Spirit House, but the means each organization used to achieve it differed greatly. The strict adherence to codes of behavior and sex-based roles are two examples of how these organizations differed. Under Baraka's leadership Spirit House functioned in a doctrinaire, dogmatic, and hierarchical fashion.[97] The expectations and treatment of women as "less-than" men are now considered sexist and following Baraka's 1974 ideological conversion to Marxism he rescinded his prior convictions about the position of women (Marable 135). Although Spirit House functioned in part as an arts center like BART/S, participants were required to adhere to rigid codes of behavior and initiation

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[95]. Most of the people who frequented Spirit House also had membership in CFUN (Watts 367).

[96]. See Chapter 2 for explanations of Kawaida and the Nguzo Saba.

[97]. United Sisters served as the female complement to United Brothers; the organizations required female members to cross their arms over their breasts and bow before the United Brothers (Watts 337).

practices that did not take place at Baraka's prior institution (Watts 367).[98] Regarding the position of women at Spirit House, Watts writes that in Kawaida, "women and men were not viewed as equals but were 'complementary,' that is, slightly more equal than master and slave" (336). Mbowa explains the subservient role women had in this system wherein the Black Woman as the "Ideal Sister" would

> affirm and bolster her man's creativity, intellectualism, and actions. While the Brother was inspiring Black people in a campaign to create a nation of Black brotherhood, Sister was creating a home environment that allowed her man to fulfill his mission. (19)

A part of this gendered focus on the home environment included the domain of children and their early education. Baraka clearly articulates the importance of children to the Revolution and how women could best serve it by educating children:

> The task of teaching the children is significant because the children are the future of the new Black nation. The women must teach Black children the values of emancipation developed by Maulana Karenga, and, in so doing they help ensure revolutionary continuity" (qtd. in Watts 339).

Baraka considered primary education to be the essential building block upon which children's future education was based (Afrikan, *Education* 3). Concern about Black children's readiness and ability to contribute to the Revolution and building of an independent Black nation inspired

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[98]. One example is that those who participated in CFUN were required to recite the Kawaida seven times per day (Watts 367).

Baraka's spouse, Amina Baraka, to found the African Free School (Campbell; Watts 368). Along with United Sisters members, Amina Baraka created the primary school "to educate and supplement" the edification of young Black children who lived in the Spirit House neighborhood (Watts 368). In a 1974 interview, Amina Baraka said the impetus for the school was an interaction with children during an afterhours tutoring program: "…we [Spirit House members] discovered the public schools were not doing an adequate job of educating our children. In addition to neglecting Black African cultural and historical background, they were not giving children the academics necessary to survive" (qtd. in Campbell). Interestingly, it was through rehearsing drama in the afterschool program that she found out the children struggled with their lines because they were illiterate (Campbell).

What is particularly fascinating is that nowhere in the Afrikan Free *Education Text*, which provides curriculum grids for every subject and grade level, does theatre or drama appear as subjects of study. [99] There could be several reasons for this omission. Perhaps drama was used as an educative device to enhance lessons in the manner known contemporarily as "drama-in-education." In this case, dramatic activities would most likely have appeared in the individual teachers' lesson plans rather than in the standardized school text. It is also possible that because theatre was used as a tool in the afterschool program it was not used during the school day. If there is no evidence, then, of children's dramatic activities having taken place at the school, why provide detailed information about the ideology and methodology of Afrikan Free School? I do so because such details provide information about how Spirit House conceived of children and

[99]. The text was published in 1974 by Jihad, Baraka's independent publishing house and is available for view at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem.

their roles, thus influencing not only how the children were depicted onstage in the Young Spirit House Movers and Players theatre productions, but also the extent to which the children had or lacked agency as producers of these works.

Unlike DIG's raison d'être of teaching children self-empowerment through knowledge of the self, Afrikan Free's purpose was to educate young children to be disciplined revolutionaries with allegiance to Black Nationalism. One of the first lessons the children learned during their two-week orientation was the school's definition of racism: a racist was "one who imposes or forces his [sic] culture and values on another people" (Afrikan, *Education* 16). An Afrikan Free education needed to have immediate applicability: to prepare the students for everyday living post-graduation and arm them with life skills necessary to survive in and contribute to the newly forming Black Nation. The school expected its attendees to develop the practical skills of: 1) machine operation (such as mimeograph and photocopy), 2) office skills, 3) typing and stenography, 4) book/record keeping and accounting, 5) auto mechanics, 6) carpentry, 7) electronics, 8) plumbing, 9) sewing, 10) cooking, and 11) journalism (Afrikan, *Education* 13). Afrikan Free emphasized cooperative learning over individual competition, which was considered a "white" concept (Watts 368). The school's *Education Text* states outright that an Afrikan Free education is "designed to make wapinduzi changa (young revolutionaries) committed to and skilled in making revolution for the Liberation of Afrikan People all over the world" (Afrikan, *Education* 1). To this end, the school used ritual to teach the students discipline and adherence to group norms of behavior. At the beginning of each school day, the students sang the school National Anthem, "Pamoja tutashinda" meaning "together we will win"; the Swahili and English lyrics stated "We are Black People, Beautiful People, together we will win"

(Afrikan, *Education* 14).[100] Following the anthem, the students examined one another for hygiene compliance as well as for clean clothes and shoes; those who failed inspection were taken to restrooms "to be corrected" (Afrikan, *Education* 15). Afrikan Free required all students to wear uniforms because "uniformity of dress minimizes competition of dress and serves to develop a complimentary [sic] attitude" (Afrikan, *Education* 15). Another everyday occurrence was a five-minute lecture about discipline and its connection to Revolutionary Nationalism (Afrikan, *Education* 15). The manner in which students spoke in class also was ritualized, reinforcing Kawaida gender roles. When a teacher asked a question of them, in order to answer the students were expected to adopt a particular physical stance according to their sex:

> The girls assume "salimu," or the position of submission, in which the arms are crossed and the hands are placed on the shoulders of the opposite arms. The boys assume "angulia," or the position of attention, with the arms folded across the chest with each hand on the elbow of the opposite arm. (Campbell)

Discipline grounded every aspect of Afrikan Free: Amina Baraka said that children learned "to work is an honor" and "you don't come to school to play" (qtd. in Campbell). So important was

[100]. Watts reports that the students also began each school day by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to the Black Liberation Flag (368).

the emphasis on Kawaida that the students received grades on how well their emotional development demonstrated the Seven Principles (Afrikan, *Education* 19).[101]

In its focus on making African and African-American experiences the central loci of the school, Afrikan Free closely resembles DIG. Both schools were ahead of their time regarding their emphases on African history and attempts to appeal to Black children through teaching them their cultural history: Watts points out, "The idea of using African culture as a way of learning and self-development prefigured by decades the use of Afro-centric educational pedagogies in inner-city schools" (368). As evidenced above, however, their methods differed greatly. In the Afrocentric Afrikan Free curriculum, students learned concentration through studying African art and music, fifth through eighth grade students studied the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts as reading subjects, and all students learned at least some Swahili (Afrikan, *Education* 4, 26).[102] To assist young students in learning Swahili, Baraka's publishing company came out with a coloring book titled *Reflections of the Sun* which was used in the primary school classroom. The book featured roughly-sketched outlines of African women, often from waist or torso up: of the book's eleven pictures, nine portray women bare-breasted while no African men are depicted. The Swahili words (and their meanings in English) which appear on the same or opposite page from pictures have no correlation to the pictures themselves (Afrikan

[101]. Grades were not assigned solely based on emotional development; students' academic performance in areas such as reading, Swahili/English (reading and writing), math, science, and history, etc. were also evaluated (Afrikan, *Education* 19).

[102]. As part of their reading on Black Arts, the *Education Text* states, "Contemporary Black literature with emphasis on the Father of Black Art-IMAMU BARAKA" (original emphasis, 32).

Reflections). The lack of correlation reads as a missed opportunity for educating the students about Swahili words and their meanings; nonetheless, the coloring book reads as innocuous in that nothing particularly radical or offensive is depicted, other than its focus on women's breasts.

The primary school education offered at Afrikan Free emphasized a continuation of the home environment "based on the extended family concept," which is similar to the NBT theatre and school practices (Afrikan, *Education* 3).[103] Afrikan Free students called their teachers "mama" and "baba" (mother and father) because the school designers believed that students were more familiar with parental relationships and continuing this in a school environment would prevent discipline problems (Afrikan, *Education* 3). As part of its functioning like a family, all students helped take care of one another and held responsibility for the school's upkeep (Afrikan, *Education* 12). About this responsibility the *Education Text* explicitly states, "They [students] must handle the entire cleaning operation from sweeping to washing blackboards as a part of their class training" (12).

Perhaps the starkest contrast between DIG and Afrikan Free appears in the role of the teacher. At DIG, teachers were guides who helped their students gain self-knowledge and offered no formal indoctrination. Afrikan Free, on the other hand, required its teachers to fulfill several roles: that of resource, guide, provider and politician (Afrikan, *Education* 10). Its *Education Text* states, "the teacher is a politician and must be skilled in the science of Revolutionary politics.

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[103]. The extended family concept also applies to Aduke Aremu's Harlem Children's Theatre Company's practices. During our first interview, Aremu spoke about the close relationships she had with HCTC members and said, "They were all like my kids" (22 Jan. 2012).

The teacher must be able to express Revolutionary Nationalism, Pan-Afrikanism and Socialism" (Afrikan, *Education* 10). As a part of their preparation, teachers not only had to learn about stages of child development, but also were required to 1) have worked in Committee for a Unified Newark, 2) proven him or herself to be a "committed Revolutionary Nationalist", and 3) attended formal education classes taught by CFUN's Social Development group (Afrikan, *Education* 6). Teacher training included studying children's interests and culture, including toys and games, how to use story and theatre as teaching tools, and creativity (Afrikan, *Education* 8). Selected curricula for teachers emphasized Nationalist development; teachers needed to learn about the Afrikan Free School concept and history, the "development and defense of the Black independent institution," Black music history, and some Swahili language (Afrikan, *Education* 8). Finally, Karenga's "Seven Criteria for Culture," adopted by Baraka, were also necessary for teachers to learn; these included mythology, history, social organization, political organization, economic organization, creative motif, and ethos (Afrikan, *Education* 10).

The first floor of Spirit House contained the theater, which was built by Baraka's friends and those Watts describes as "neighborhood youth," likely adolescent Black males (291). In the above description and within the texts of many BAM plays, it appears that "Black youth" were primarily boys, not girls.[104] Young Spirit House Movers and Players' productions used children

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[104]. As is not surprising given the sexism of BAM, the trajectory of Black females in literature begins with them as "girls," who progress to the identities of "whores," "bitches," and occasionally "mothers." Thus, it appears that the genderless child or youth of BAM was conceived as a masculine being with no room for feminine identity, which ran counter to and threatened the Black chauvinist militarism of the movement. The sexism of the Black Arts

and adolescents as performers in at least three known militant message plays. Two of these plays (and perhaps more I was unable to locate) were written by Baraka. The first, *Board of Education* (1968) utilized children as actors and is grouped in the category "children's plays" in the Black Drama database, indicating its intended audience may have included children. The second play is untitled and unpublished, but it was showcased in 1968 on the public broadcast program "Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant" featuring the Young Spirit House Movers and Players (Jones; "LeRoi Jones"). This performance by children and early adolescents was described as "a powerful protest about race relations in America" and "Using synched movements and poetry, the kids address various issues from inequality to the lack of a well-rounded Black history curriculum in the schools" ("LeRoi Jones").

Baraka describes *Board of Education* as "an agitation" (Baraka 4). In the play, four boys and two girls speak before a Board of Education meeting to argue for education relevant to their lives. They believe the education they are receiving to be not only inadequate in that it is beneath their intelligence level but also that it isn't preparing them to be successful in society. One line calls the education "The bum's rush. By bums. To be bums" (Baraka 4). What's more, the children deplore the focus on white history and its valorization of Cortez, calling him a

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Movement is an important topic; however, it is outside of the focus of my research here. For scholarship on this issue, see for example Patricia Hill Collins's "When Fighting Words are Not Enough" in *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (1998) and Aida Mbowa's "The Making of the Black Woman: Writing and Performing Race and Gender During the Black Arts Movement" (2007).

"murderer of colored people and destroyer of civilization" (Baraka 4). *Board* repeatedly speaks to the Black children's desire to "know themselves" through learning African and African American history. They want to learn about Blacks as fully realized human beings and condemn the minstrel stereotypes presented them, such as the "super dubble mcshuffle coon," (Baraka 4). The Black Aesthetic's focus on masculine power and feminine physical attributes comes out in the alternative education for which the children argue; they want to see Blacks portrayed as "men," "sons of men," "sons of kings and conquerors," and "daughters of beauty" (Baraka 4, 5). In this vein, the "schools of ourselves" the children envision will include curricula of "great Black men and yellow men, brown and red men. Colored men!" (Baraka 6).

Similar to BAM plays for adults, *Board* presents Afrocentrism as an ideal mechanism for viewing the world. The children talk about their African heritage, its connection to Islam, Benin, and the Sphinx (Baraka 9). But the Afrocentrism Baraka presents in this text is not limited to African history or material culture, rather its scope encompasses Black American culture and people as well. The children express yearning for knowledge of their cultural heritage which has been denied in school: ALL CHILDREN: "We want our heritage," BOY 1: "Our smooth Black style," GIRL 1: "To animate the world" (Baraka 9). Their reverence for Black American culture extends to its potentiality to reframe the world as the children state their desire for life to emulate Smokey Robinson Miracles and John Coltrane (Baraka 9). Two adult characters in the play, called simply Man and Woman, occasionally ask the children questions to seek more information about their reasoning for coming before the board. The children tell the Man and the Woman that they are beautiful "old people" (meaning adult Blacks) and are tired of the schools' denial of

Man's and Woman's existence, as BOY 3 states, "Except as shuffling shadows…of white people" (Baraka 9).

There is no question that the play is biased against Eurocentrism and white people, as were all of Baraka's plays of this era. When questioned by an adult male who attends the meeting if the new schools will include learning about white men, the students intimate that such learning would be redundant because they have already been taught about white history *ad nauseum*: GIRL 1 says, "You name 'em we sure heard about 'em." BOY 1 adds, "They tell us all the time" (Baraka 6-7). The language the children use to criticize the curricula, such as "acts of fags and quacks" speaks to Baraka's and the Black Arts Movement's homophobia and linkage of homosexuality to decadent white society. This example also gives credence to the idea that Baraka did not soften his language to be more "appropriate" for children as performers or audience members. Baraka quotes Claude McKay's criticism of white society for teaching Black children "trite moralisms of a society in which he [Blacks] was, as a child and would be as an adult, denied any legitimate place" (qtd. in Baraka 10). The children question the qualifications of non-Black teachers "who don't get it;" an example given of those who "get it" is hearing the song "Tracks of my Tears" and understanding its meaning (Baraka 12). A person's ability to dance and a concomitant connection to spirituality are also viewed as legitimizing one's qualification to teach Black children (Baraka 12). By contrast, the children feel that their schooling teaches them the opposite of human connection: GIRL 1: "And our schools can't teach that," BOY 2: "They teach only coldness and death" (Baraka 12).

Throughout the play, Baraka situates children as having positions of agency to affect change in their education and the greater society. One example of this occurs when the children

tell the board members that although the board has nothing to teach them, the children themselves might be able to teach the board (Baraka 13). At one point, it seems as though Man and Woman want to improve the children's education, but they are at a loss for how to accomplish this: MAN: "We don't have the power," ALL CHILDREN: "No, you don [sic] and we dont [sic], at least not now…But we will" (Baraka 6). Here we see that the children believe in themselves and that in the future they will have more political agency. Later in the play's progression, in a discussion with Woman and Man the children disclose that they see themselves as change-makers in ways that the adults do not yet see for themselves: GIRL 1: "The world can be shaped like our laughter" (Baraka 8). Demands are placed on the board members by the children to resign if they cannot or will not "do what we ask!" (Baraka 14). Demands are then followed by the children's threats of "drag[ing] you down," wherein the children slowly advance toward the board members (Baraka 15). Immediately following this stage direction which ends the play, the script includes a note by Baraka called "Instructions for Actors" which states: "At this pt [sic] reality is pure/take care of whatever business confronts you, from disruption to murder, what ever [sic] you can come away clean with Good Luck and Peace" (Baraka 15).

Children performed Baraka's unnamed play featured on the "Inside Bed Stuy" public television program in 1968. It belongs in the category of "agitational-propaganda" theatre like many of Baraka's plays of this period. The play has no named characters or linear plot; instead, it takes the form of a poem written for several voices which would be described contemporarily as "spoken-word." Chanting and repetition are used throughout, as are single voices punctuated by choral voices. Child actors speak directly to the audience to appeal to them with lines such as "Hey you, you, and you too teacher" ("LeRoi Jones"). The children wear what appear to be

dashiki-style uniforms, reflecting the Pan-African ideology of Spirit House. This work displays thematic similarities to *Board of Education*, but differs in specific content and in language.

Violence is a major theme of the work: Baraka uses violent, crude language and his lines depict acts of physical violence. The presence of both kinds of violence in a play utilizing children as actors and potentially intended for child audiences is distinctive in that mainstream Theatre for Youth practices at the time (and at present in 2012) preclude such depictions as "inappropriate" for children. In the opening, Baraka conceives of Black children as strong, coming from a long line of strong Black people. He presents violence and strength as concomitant, reflecting the Black Nationalist stance of the era. Showcasing the conflation of strength and violence, the children say "We are the murderers of murderers, Blood and Fire, Blood and Fire, Blood Blood and Fire!" ("Inside"). These lines are reminiscent of Baraka's 1965 poem "Black Art" which includes the line "we want 'poems that kill'."[105] (qtd. in Diggory 62). Next the play chronicles the violent history thrust upon Blacks including slavery, the Vietnam draft, and problems which arose in the Civil Rights movement, such as church bombings and the murder of children ("Inside"). The children warn the audience not to be "scared, scared, scared" because if they let fear control them they will end up "dead, dead, dead!" ("Inside").

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[105]. As ya Salaam explains, "He was not simply speaking metaphorically. During that period armed self-defense and slogans such as 'Arm yourself or harm yourself' established a social climate that promoted confrontation with the white power structure, especially the police (e.g. 'Off the pigs')."

Baraka's Nationalism allows no place for Christianity and he uses the play to attack this religion. Violent, crass language is used to describe and deride Christianity in a line about Christian conversion: "Gave me some cross with some dead white man hangin' from it" ("Inside"). Baraka argues against the Christian teaching of "Love thy enemy" by having the chorus repeat the phrase after a single voice shouts injustices perpetrated against Black Americans, such as "Raped your mother," and "Lynched your father" ("Inside"). The lines "love, love, love" are repeated to a build a crescendo in emotion and volume until a single voice cries out, "Love for everybody else, but when will we love ourselves?" ("Inside"). In one of the play's few humorous moments, a single voice calls the nursery rhyme about Old Mother Hubbard giving her dog a bone "a lie," explaining that instead "She gave the dog a steak and gave the bones to Negroes" ("Inside"). This line is immediately followed by violent imagery describing how during slavery, whites gave the undesirable parts of carcasses to slaves, such as neck bones, pigs' feet, ham hocks, chitterlings and guts and how introducing these types of food to Blacks transformed them into "gut-eatin', whiskey consumin' …Uncle Tom Niggas" ("Inside").

Baraka attacks white cultural hegemony throughout the play from numerous angles. As in *Board*, the child actors argue for an education that is relevant to their lives and criticize the educational institution's single-minded focus on white people. Not only do the children complain about learning white-only history (with the exception of George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington), but also they decry Eurocentric nursery rhymes by saying that all of the characters in them were white. They state, "Everything we learn is white," and list as examples Jack and Jill, Dick and Jane, and the school subjects of history, civics, math, and social studies ("Inside"). In another humorous moment, one girl states, "Santa Claus is" and chorus responds

“White!” to which the girl responds, “And he comin’ down from a Black chimney. Shucks, no wonder Black people hate themselves!” (“Inside”). Herein Baraka links the omission of Black existence to Black self-hatred; another line pointedly states “We are taught to hate ourselves” (“Inside”). Regarding Black children’s development of a healthy self-identity, the author argues that Black children suffer an identity crisis in America because they do not learn about themselves; the children state, “I don’t know who I am, I try to act like somebody else” (“Inside”). Upon one child asking “What has America done for me” another answers, “Nothing, but made me a zombie” wherein all children assume the physical stance of zombies, shuffling in place with their arms raised forward and blank expressions on their faces (“Inside”). The children directly question their purpose for living in the United States with the repeated line, “America, America, why did you bring us here, America?” (“Inside”). They also point out the irony of schools teaching Black children to sing “My country ‘tis of thee” with the line shouted by the chorus, “Can’t you see the hypocrisy?” (“Inside”). Baraka criticizes that the only place it seems that America has reserved for Black representation is in minstrel stereotypes; Black women as “Aunt Jemimas”, “Beulahs”, and “Sapphires” and Black men as “Stepin Fetchit” and “Uncle Tom” (“Inside”). [106] The children tell the audience that within this oppressive system,

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[106]. Black actor Lincoln Perry created the character of Stepin Fetchit, the foolish “laziest man in the world” in an audition for the 1927 film *In Old Kentucky* in order to set himself apart from the other Black actors (Hurst 6 Mar. 2006). Although Perry became a millionaire playing this role in numerous films throughout the 1930s, the NAACP gained ground pressuring Hollywood to stop the portrayal of Blacks as stereotypes around the same time that Perry demanded pay equal to those of his white counterparts. Consequently, he ended his film career by the 1940s (Hurst 6

Blacks find themselves faced with poor material conditions, including living in poverty, slums, massive unemployment "last hired, first fired", slavery, and assassinations ("Inside"). The list of injustices culminates with all of the children as a chorus chanting "Boo boo boo for America!" while throwing their right arms in the air seemingly making a Black Power fist.

As a solution to the problems caused by Eurocentrism, Baraka uses the play to offer Afrocentrism, and more specifically, Black Nationalism, as a necessary alternative for the Black audience. At one point a child asks the audience directly, "Do you like integration, or would you rather have your own nation?" ("Inside"). An example of Baraka's allegiance to Kawaida at this time is presented near the play's end when the children say words in Swahili at which time the boys assume the gendered positions of "angulia" and the girls "salimu." The play both offers an alternative education proposal through a focus on Black leaders such as Sojourner Truth, Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and Malcolm X (called a "prophet" and "one of the greatest Black men who ever lived") and a brief history lesson, as the children offer a line of information about each figure in order to teach the Black audience about their history ("Inside"). Baraka also intends to convince the audience of the relevance of Black history with the repetition

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Mar. 2006). "Beulah" was a popular radio program in the mid 1940s-early 1950s and then became a television program which ran on ABC from 1950-1953 (Bodroghkozy). The popular show portrayed a Black housekeeper known as "queen of the kitchen," and was criticized for its "perpetuating comic black stereotypes" (Bodroghkozy). "Sapphire" refers to the stereotype of an angry Black woman who is constantly berating or emasculating either her male partner or other men around her (Pilgrim "Sapphire"). The stereotype seems to have originated with the character Sapphire Stevens on the Amos n'Andy radio and television shows (Pilgrim "Sapphire").

of the line "Can't you see, all these people are Black and a part of history" ("Inside"). One of the most emotionally moving parts of the play occurs immediately after the "Boo for America" segment when a boy who appears to be no more than seven years old recites:

> Today is ours, let's live it,
>
> And love is strong, let's give it!
>
> A song can help, let's sing it!
>
> Peace is dear, let's bring it!
>
> The past is gone, don't ruin it
>
> Our work is here, let's do it.
>
> Our world is wrong, let's right it.
>
> The battle is hard, let's fight it
>
> The road is rough, let's clear it
>
> The future's strong, don't fear it
>
> If faith's asleep, let's wake it.
>
> Today is ours, let's take it. ("Inside")

In the above poem, the young actor functions as a motivating agent to inspire the Black audience to action. A common belief in Theatre for Youth is rejected in this play: the child as an empty, innocent vessel. Henry Jenkins explains,

> The myth of childhood innocence, as James Kincaid notes, "empties" the child of its own political agency, so that it may more perfectly fulfill the symbolic demands we make upon it. The innocent child wants nothing, desires nothing, and demands nothing—except, perhaps, its own innocence. Kincaid critiques the idea that childhood innocence is something preexisting—an "eternal" condition—that must be "protected" (1-2)

In this play Baraka demonstrates that children are not empty vessels to be filled with adult knowledge and political agency; herein we see children as teachers and political agitators of the presumably majority adult audience. Throughout the play, the conception of children as innocent beings who should be protected from strong language, adult knowledge and violence is turned on its head as the child actors display intimate knowledge of racism, rape, murder, and assassination. Instead of shielding children from the harsh realities of post-Civil Rights America, the play shows the children actively engaged in the fight to create a new Black Nation. Thus, Baraka shows no differentiation in agit-prop theatre using adult casts and that using child casts.

However, there is tension regarding both of these plays, from a childhood studies standpoint, in that both appear to depict the children in an agentic fashion, functioning as the Revolutionary Nationalists Baraka hoped to develop at his African Free School. But how much agency did the child actors who depicted characters written by Baraka really have in the creation and execution of these pieces? When one considers the regimented and hierarchical educational environment created for children at Spirit House's school, it is doubtful that the girls and boys who acted in *Board* and the untitled play had much of a say. Their job, it would seem, was to act

as if they had political agency to affect revolution, when in fact they were parroting Baraka's agenda. In other words, the children are commodified.

The Uncle Toms, written by Hebert "Herbie" Stokes is the only play I have found which went up at Spirit House that was written, directed, and acted in by an adolescent. Seventeen-year-old Stokes, who is described as having "worked closely with Jones [Baraka] at Spirit House," cast the play using his brother and friends from his block (Front Matter; Stokes 58).[107] Using a cast of male adolescents would have appealed to younger audience members at Spirit House who would have looked up to the actors as role models. In the didactic play, three "boys" active in the Black revolutionary movement, successfully convince two other boys to renounce their loyalty to "the white man" and swear allegiance to their Black brothers and join them in their fight against white hegemony. Ed Bullins considered the three-page play important enough to be included in the 1968 Black Theatre issue of *The Drama Review: TDR*, which he edited.[108]

Not surprisingly, the play has much in common with Baraka's two youth-oriented plays above. The ideology depicted in the play is Black Nationalist with an emphasis on Black male achievement through brotherhood and unity. The ideas presented by Stokes's play mirror those of Baraka's at the time, and, like *Board* and the untitled play, these ideas are conveyed through violent language and the suggestion of violent acts. Stokes employs strong language such as "mother fuckers", "fucked-up minds" and "niggers" to set the scene of an ideological turf war

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[107]. This play was published in the 1968 "Black Theatre" issue of *The Drama Review: TDR*.

[108]. Bullins provides no "editor's note" explaining why he chose to include the plays he did in the Black Theatre issue of *TDR*.

between Black male youth on an urban street (Stokes). Skippy, June Bug, and Frankie, the protagonists, talk about beating up the other boys if they cannot convince them to join them in their struggle against oppression. They propose violence against "the white man" several times throughout the short play. At one point, June Bug explains the race war to his peers: "Man, do you know this is a war and the white man is our enemy and we got to kill them [sic]?" (Stokes 59). Later Skippy adds that the white man will always treat Blacks as animals "…until we unite and drive him off our planet" (Stokes 60). Another way in which Stokes demonstrates allegiance with Baraka and the Black Aesthetic is in the emphasis the characters place on "thinking Black" with the implication that having Black skin does not necessarily make one authentically Black.

The Uncle Toms differs from Baraka's two plays explored above in several ways. Although many of the ideas presented are the same as Baraka's, the dialogue is trite, simplistic and often comprised of non-nuanced exposition. To be blunt, it is obvious that Stokes was not an experienced playwright, regardless of how closely he worked with Baraka at Spirit House. The play also differs in that it is free of Muslim and Kawaida references. Stokes mentions no minstrel stereotypes, other than the title of the play, but he describes the reason that Black parents work for whites as "ignorance," implying that they cannot see the part they play in fostering their own oppression (Stokes 60). Another way in which Stokes's work differs from Baraka's is in its suggestion of murdering white people. Although Baraka alludes to murder in the aforementioned plays, specifically in his note to actors in *Board*, none of his characters speak of direct action such as the exchange between First and Second Boy near the play's end: FIRST BOY "If this is true I'm going to kill me every single white man." SECOND BOY "Right. From now one they're going to die like animals" (Stokes 60).

Although at first glance it would appear that Stokes had agency in the creation and execution of *The Uncle Toms*, the degree of his creative freedom is questionable. Once again, considering the hierarchical structure of Spirit House and its members' compulsory adherence to dogma, I doubt Stokes was free in his choice of subject matter for his play. Nonetheless, that Spirit House fostered Stokes's work as a young person and deemed his voice suitable for inclusion onstage demonstrates the extent to which both the Black Arts Movement and the Black Power Movement (for they were aligned at the time) valued the creative voice of young people.

As Black cultural institutions, National Black Theatre and Spirit House both emerged from the Black Arts Movement to produce works for Black audiences in order to better Blacks—both advocated Afrocentrism, Pan-Africanism, essentialism, self-determination, self-sufficiency, and the establishment of Black identity. Their founders left Greenwich Village to relocate to Black communities, Teer to Harlem and Baraka to Harlem and then to Newark. The major difference between the companies manifested in their approaches to Black liberation; Teer's group focused on "positive transformation" while Baraka's group advocated armed self-defense and negativity directed at whites and white culture. Each institution demonstrated commitment to education but their definitions of education varied. For NBT, education or "liberation" of adults and children originated within and could only happen if one came from a centered place of self-knowledge. At Spirit House, education for adults and children meant acceptance of and allegiance to Black Nationalist and Kawaida practices and beliefs, best exhibited by African Free students receiving grades on how effectively their comportment demonstrated the Kawaida Seven Principles. Thus, at NBT educators encouraged children to learn to express themselves in order to be fully realized human beings and discover their own identities whereas Spirit House

prescribed children's roles as young revolutionaries and as the "future of the new Black nation" (Baraka qtd. in Watts 39). Overall, NBT and Spirit House conceived of children differently which led to theatre productions involving them bearing little, if any, resemblance. NBT used theatre with children to help broaden their perspectives; as Faison said, drama and other arts "prepared [children] for another way of looking at life" (23 Oct. 2011). DIG students and other child participants in education programs at NBT created their own performances and rituals with assistance from their teachers which contrasts greatly with Spirit House's agit-propaganda plays primarily written and directed by adults. Baraka's method of using child actors to shout "Are you proud-proud-proud" at Black audiences was a far cry from Teer's method of "viewing Blackness from a positive point of view" ("Conversation").

Chapter 6

Amas Repertory (Musical) Theatre's Eubie Blake Youth Theatre

AMAS Repertory Theatre's history is fascinating because it is the only theatre company in this study to be founded by a person of color as a *negative* reaction to the Black Power movement. Then again, the theatre's founder, Rosetta LeNoire, lived a life against the cultural tides in theatre and is the subject of Linda K. Norflett's 1983 dissertation "The Theatre Career of Rosetta LeNoire."[109] To give a highly abbreviated introduction of LeNoire, she acted in the Federal Theatre's Negro Unit in New York in Orson Welles's "Voodoo" Macbeth at the age of 25 and went on to work professionally in theatre as an actor and dancer for over 30 years, touring the U.S. during the height of Jim Crow segregation, before she decided to found her own company in New York City ("Rosetta LeNoire" 56; Schwartz 23; "A Brief History"). Although AMAS preexisted its youth theatre by about two years, a children's program was extremely important to LeNoire; in a 1982 interview, she said "If I have to give up AMAS, I'll give up the adult theatre, but not Eubie Blake Youth Theatre. That's where I get my greatest satisfaction and that's [children] our future!" (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson).[110]

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[109]. Norflett received her PhD from New York University.

[110]. The AMAS newsletters, which the company started circulating in Mar. 1985, occasionally included a section devoted to Eubie Blake Youth Theatre called "The Children's Corner" wherein EBYT participants' edited and unedited answers to questions such as "Who do you admire" were published. The newsletter also had a section called "Where Are They Now" which listed AMAS adult and EBYT performers' current roles in theatre, film, and television. One

In fact, LeNoire's impetus to start the AMAS adult theatre came from an experience she had witnessing Black children learning hatred from the Black Power movement. In 1968, LeNoire visited a Harlem church and overheard "a prominent Black" [adult] in the Harlem community rehearse this exchange with six children: [adult]: "Who do we love?" [children answer]: "We love Black." [adult]: "Who do we hate?" [children]: "We hate whitey" ("A Brief"). As an untitled document in the AMAS archival material located at the Schomburg Center states:

> [Throughout her career, LeNoire] had seen, heard, and loved through hatred and prejudice. But never until that moment had she felt compelled to personally respond to these injustices. Using her own abilities and the business she knew best—the theatre—Miss LeNoire decided to do what she could to promote a community where all people could work together, with respect for individual skills and talents, rather than for race or color" ("A Brief").

Concern about both Black children's emotional health and lack of community support influenced LeNoire's approach to establishing Eubie Blake Youth Theatre. LeNoire believed that the "Black race" had the highest percentage of teen suicides in the U.S. and that a nation's health "reside[d] in its young people (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson; "AMAS at 30"). Thus, LeNoire saw improving the lives of Black youths as a way to improve the U.S. overall. LeNoire believed that

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former EBYT participant, Steven Thompson, reportedly went on to be on *The Cosby Show* in 1985 (AMAS "Newsletter" Mar. 1985).

Black children should love themselves, but that this love must come from a place of true self-confidence and not as rote, rehearsed reaction of hatred of all that was not Black. She stated, “We should love ourselves, but love based on hate is insecurity and fear” (Allsopp D1). Furthermore, LeNoire wanted Black youth to receive recognition instead of being portrayed negatively in the media: in 1982 she argued, “There’s some good kids in this world, but nobody’s talking about them” (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson).

LeNoire originally wanted her company to be named The UN Theatre in order to reflect her conviction of universal human equality, but the United Nations would not grant her permission to use the name (LeNoire Intv.by Hutson). After the UN turned her down, LeNoire strove to find the “most democratic, positive” word in English, which she felt “love” exemplified. But, unhappy “with what had been made of that word,” LeNoire decided to use a form of the Latin word for love instead (LeNoire Intv. by Hatch). The resulting company’s name, AMAS, means “you love” in Latin (Spencer 23).

Even the name LeNoire chose for her company sets her apart from BAM-affiliated theatre companies at this time that remained committed to separation of the races and, often, advocated a hateful attitude toward whites. LeNoire, on the other hand, believed that love needed to overcome hatred based on perceived racial differences and past instances of oppression. LeNoire explained the climate in which she developed the theatre as well as her childhood mentors’ influence on her: “It was the end of the civil-rights movement, and I felt a great deal of polarization in the air. Neither Bo BoJangles nor Eubie Blake had thought in terms of color…” (qtd. in Holden C1). She understood a need for separation of Blacks from whites but also felt that its time had passed. LeNoire stated:

> AMAS means you love; that's what we must all ultimately do for the world's survival. Separatism was needed to serve a definite purpose, but love with hate at its base is transient. Live together, communicate, feel and grow. I've been called Uncle Tom, but all that's changing. There is more respect among Blacks for each other every day and I love it. (Allsopp D1)

LeNoire's vision of a theatre where differences could be celebrated and whites welcomed is even more compelling when one takes into account the racist experiences she endured throughout the course of her lifetime. Perhaps the most traumatic was the loss of mother when she was a child as a direct result of the racism her family faced in Harlem (Schwartz 21-22). In LeNoire's words:

> I'll never forget that as a little girl seven years of age, I saw my mother die…because they would not take her in Harlem Hospital when she was giving birth. Those days most women, white and colored [sic], had their children at home, and they didn't have any professional help. […] My mother was carrying my youngest brother. She got started with the pains of birth. They took her to this hospital downtown, where they said, "Take her up to Harlem." They took her straight up to Harlem. When they got to Harlem Hospital, [people there] said, "Throw the nigger out," and they pushed her out the door, and [she] fell on the steps and died. I will never forget it, never, never. (Schwartz 21-22)

In 1969, when LeNoire sought support for her vision of a multiracial theatre she faced resistance from the Black community as evidenced by Blacks labeling her an "Uncle Tom" (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). Of her decision to have a multiracial rather than a Black company,

LeNoire said, "I've taken a lot of abuse from it, and most from my own [Black] race" (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). In the short term other Blacks active in theatre held a negative view of LeNoire. Numerous individuals and Black organizations turned down her requests for help "because of our multi-racial-ethnic concept" (Allsopp D1). LeNoire's vision ran contrary to that of many Black theatre artists during the middle of the Black Arts Movement: Instead of shunning whites from her theatre LeNoire wanted to work cooperatively with them. LeNoire wrote that the AMAS concept is "that the creative arts can be employed as a powerful instrument for peaceful change toward healthier individuals. In the process of working together creatively, not only is the joy of learning reactivated, but prejudices disappear" (qtd. in "Benefit"). Arts surpassed the skin color of their creator, in her opinion (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). LeNoire believed that through theatre's unique medium different "races, colors, and religions" could be gathered and that through this medium, the audience could learn "how picayune their prejudices are and [theatre] helps them to shed these faults" (Spencer 23). Furthermore, LeNoire believed music in particular is beneficial to bringing people together, which is the reason she chose to devote AMAS to the musical form (Holden C1).

Although LeNoire faced the above obstacles, she nonetheless founded her company using $500 from her savings account in 1969 (Allsopp D1). Shauneille Perry, a Black female director who went on to be well known for her work on J.E. Franklin's *Black Girl* with Woodie King Jr.'s New Federal Theatre and other productions, worked closely with LeNoire on AMAS's first production in April 1969 (Allsopp D1; "A Brief"). AMAS based this production, *Soul, Yesterday and Today*, on the poetry of Langston Hughes and Perry directed it ("A Brief History"; Allsopp D1). The extremely low-budget production played in parks throughout the city and the

company rehearsed it both in LeNoire's basement and in Perry's apartment (Allsopp D1).[111] During the play's run, she felt shocked that the poor white children who gathered knew the words of Hughes' poetry, while the Black children did not know them (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). This affected LeNoire deeply; she was saddened that Black children had not learned their cultural heritage (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). Although she herself had not learned any Black poetry in school, she had hoped the situation for Black children would have changed by the late 1960s (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson).

With regard to AMAS's inception during the Black Arts Movement, the company shared at least one characteristic with the highly political pro-Black anti-white theatres in that its initial productions took place in the street. That being said, AMAS differed greatly from these companies in several ways. For example, none of people initially involved in AMAS held political or activist backgrounds and performance was the means with which they were most familiar to affect change (LeNoire Intv. by Hatch). In addition to its multi-racial focus, the identity of both the AMAS founder and its primary director as Black women differentiated AMAS from the majority of BAM theatre practices.[112] Black men dominated as founders,

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[111]. Shauneille Perry was honored by the U.S. Congress House of Representatives in November 2011 for her theatrical contributions as an actor, author, director and educator and her status as a "as a living legend of the American and Black Theater" (Rangel qtd. in "In Celebration" E2021). Among her many accomplishments, Perry won four AUDELCO awards and taught Theatre and Black Studies at City University of New York (Rangel).

[112]. I have not found evidence of LeNoire, unlike Aremu, commenting on men dominating the theatrical arena, yet in 1972 she found it necessary to state her opinion of Perry as "one of the

directors, and writers of theatre coming out of BAM at this time. Aida Mbowa reports, "With the exception of Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theater, Black men owned all the institutions/infrastructures producing Black Nationalist Theater. […] The majority of the plays produced in these institutions were by Black men" (Mbowa 15).

Another way in which AMAS differed from BAM theatres was the form of its productions. AMAS mainly focused on musical biographies "based on folks who have contributed to our [Black] race" and "unsung heroes of our race" (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson).[113] It is not my intent to provide a complete production history of the AMAS works for adults, but it is relevant to illustrate a few examples of Black subjects AMAS focused on for its original musical biographies in the 1970s and early 1980s. In its 1976-1977 season, AMAS presented the musical *BoJangles!* based on the life of LeNoire's godfather, Bill "BoJangles" Robinson. *Adam, the Life of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* took place in the next year's season and focused on New York State's first congressman of African-American descent. In the 1978-1979 season, singer Ethel Waters's life became fodder for *Sparrow in Flight, the Story of Ethel Waters*. Finally, AMAS's 1979-1980 season included *Dunbar* about African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and the

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genuine ladies in the business. It was people like her who donated their talents freely that gave me so much encouragement" (Allsopp D1).

[113]. Later in its history, AMAS expanded the scope of cultures upon which new musical theatre productions were based to include Latino, Caucasian, European, and Jewish cultures (AMAS). A promotional flyer included in an AMAS file at the Schomburg Center states "AMAS actively combines artists and audience members from every possible racial, ethnic and religious background, bringing them together to work and learn from each other" (AMAS).

1980-1981 season featured *The Peanut Man* about African-American botanist George Washington Carver. Few of these shows received reviews from either *New York Amsterdam News* or *The New York Times*. However, a review of *Peanut Man* from *Amsterdam News* provides a glimpse into the historical context of race relations in the United States in which this play was presented. The writer positively reviewed much of the AMAS production, but takes umbrage with the fantastical and historically inaccurate depiction of Carver as a young Black man interacting with a young White woman at Iowa State College; he writes

> In the face of what's happening to Blacks in these times in the U.S.A.—Black men's hearts beng [sic] cut out by a white "hunter" in Buffalo, New York: the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in America; a violent attack on Black kids by white kids at Staten Island's New Dorp High School; and the recent racist closing of Sydenham Hospital in Harlem—a distortion of the African's dilemma in America is not needed. (Salaam 40)

Perhaps *The Peanut Man* and other AMAS musical biographies overemphasized cooperation among races and underplayed racial oppression in order to better fulfill LeNoire's mission of unity among all peoples. In any case, the choice to minimize racial friction in *Peanut Man*, and potentially other musicals, would have further distanced the AMAS theatre from its BAM theatre contemporaries.

In terms of the form of AMAS productions, "musical biographies" were anathema to the Black Aesthetic; the Black protagonist content of such plays would have been insufficient to satisfy the tenets of the Black Arts Movement. In 1969, it was simply not enough that Blacks be

represented positively onstage, BAM proponents wanted a complete overhaul of the system of representation itself. LeNoire did not like the legacy of minstrelsy, but she believed minstrel and minstrel-derived characters like Stepin Fechitt [sic] and some on television's "The Jeffersons" [1975-1985] were necessary roles in order for Black actors to make progress in the field of entertainment (Spencer 23).[114] Spencer quotes LeNoire on this topic, "Don't forget those of yesteryear did what they had to, but we can glory in the fact that we also have a Bill Cosby show today [1985] that every Black viewer can feel proud about" (Spencer 23). [115]

Early donations to AMAS came not only in the form of talent, but also in financial contributions. Several organizations gave monetarily to the theatre, despite its early controversy. The Harlem Cultural Council gave AMAS its first grant for *Soul* to be produced on school grounds, at churches and in parks ("Profile-Rosetta"). This was unusual because the HCC did not often fund organizations outside of Harlem and primarily funded only those that were exclusively Black (Allsopp D1). Even the New York State Council for the Arts (NYSCA) encouraged LeNoire to have an all-Black theatre and did not understand why she refused to do so. In response she said, "I have to set the example that we all can work together…I *want* to set

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[114] . See explanation of Stepin Fetchit in footnote 106 on page 170.

[115] . Black audience reception to *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) is too complex of a topic to be covered adequately within the scope of this study. See Leslie B. Inniss and Joe R. Feagin's article "The Cosby Show: The View from the Black Middle Class" in *Journal of Black Studies* 25.6 (1995): 692-711, and books *The Cosby Show: Audiences, Impact, and Implications* (1992) by Linda K. Fuller and *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (1992) by Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis for more on this issue.

that example" (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). Yet NYSCA officials quickly became convinced of her mission: In LeNoire's first NYSCA grant application, she asked only for $10,000 but the council awarded her $25,000 (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). AMAS continued to receive funding from NYSCA throughout the early 1970s: In the 1971-1972 fiscal year the council gave $13 million in grants and these focused on funding theatre companies "helping to create a new theater of social issues" including "women's liberation to Black consciousness" with a focus on funding "Spanish-speaking communities, minorities in inner cities and suburbs and children" ("Theatrical" B6; Anekwe D6). Seventeen thousand dollars went to AMAS for showcase productions and workshops during that fiscal year (Anekwe D6). The National Endowment for the Arts funded AMAS for the first time in 1972 ("Benefit"). In many of the AMAS newsletters circulated during the 1980s, pleas for financial and in-kind donations occur frequently, as do the names of individual and corporate donors grouped by the level of donation given, such as "associate" for contributions of $25-$49, "donor" at $50-$99, "Patron" from $100-$499, "Benefactor" from $500-$999, and "Angel" for contributions above $1000 (AMAS Newsletter Sept. 1985 3).

Although the theatre received financial backing, it was primarily a labor of love for its teachers, staff, and actors who, at least during the very early years, only received reimbursement expenses (Allsopp D1; Burdine, Jr. 195). LeNoire noted that teachers often returned the expense money to the theatre (Allsopp D1). In 1971 AMAS had only one regular paid employee and even LeNoire as the Artistic Director of AMAS received no payment for her work (LeNoire Intv. by Hatch). Nonetheless, by 1985, AMAS had grown into a "company with six figures in costumes, scenery and the numerous overtime hours of a dedicated staff" (Spencer 23). Also of note is that

of the five theatre companies I studied, AMAS Repertory Theatre's youth theatre program (now known as AMAS Musical Theatre) is the only youth theatre program still in existence as of July 2012.[116]

LeNoire's biographical information is pertinent to understanding how and why the Eubie Blake Youth Theatre component of AMAS came into existence. Several factors affected LeNoire's early perception of herself that may help explain why one of the goals for her theatre was to help young people, especially young people of color, develop a positive self-image. In a 1982 interview, LeNoire described herself as growing up in Hell's Kitchen in New York City speaking patois because her family came from the West Indies, losing her mother very young, and having a stepmother who forbid her from speaking patois (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). Upon moving to New York City as a child she found that her Catholic upbringing was frowned upon in Harlem (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). As if all these obstacles were not enough, LeNoire had Ricketts at birth and the treatment at the time required doctors to break both of her legs "so they could grow in a proper fashion" (Hill and Barnett 306). Furthermore, she grew up ashamed to be Black (Spencer 23). Two famous men with well-established performance careers took her under their wings and in so doing improved LeNoire's self-image: The first, her godfather Bill

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[116]. Officially changed its name from AMAS Rep to AMAS Musical in the fall of 1989 ("A Brief History"). The youth theatre component, Eubie Blake Youth Theatre (EBYT), has been reformulated and renamed after AMAS's late founder, Rosetta LeNoire. The Rosetta LeNoire Musical Theatre Academy has been the youth company's name since the late 1990s ("Historical"). AMAS has re-envisioned the program as "a pre-professional musical theater training program for inner-city teenagers ("Historical").

"BoJangles" Robinson, taught her to dance as a way to strengthen her legs and from the time she was an adolescent brought her with him on tours as a dancer (Hill and Barnett 306; LeNoire Intv. by Hatch). The second, the composer Eubie Blake, considered by some to be the "first Black to find acceptance and success on Broadway" tutored her in singing ("Eubie Blake Biography"). [117] Blake in particular taught LeNoire that being Black was not shameful and that she had many talents to share with the world (Spencer 23). LeNoire said,

> When I was coming up I must confess that I had a terrible complex and was ashamed of being Black. But Eubie told me to hold my head up because I had beauty in my soul and beautiful thoughts to give to the world. That is why I love him for his healing powers. (qtd. in Spencer 23)

Because Blake inspired her so, she named AMAS's youth theatre in his honor ("Eubie Blake Biography"). Eubie Blake Youth Theatre (EBYT), as originally conceived, operated for youth of any race 10-16 years of age (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson; "Eubie Blake Youth"). [118] Children came from the five New York boroughs to participate in EBYT and had the opportunity to perform in at least one production annually (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson; "Historical"). EBYT offered classes on Saturdays from 9:30am-2:30pm to provide child participants with training in

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[117]. Blake composed East Coast ragtime. Some of his musical influences include Mozart, Chopin, Victor Herbert, Gershwin, Debussy, Strauss, and Tchaikovsky ("Eubie Blake Biography").

[118]. By 1982, LeNoire generally expected that participants aged 16 would leave the program, but said sometimes she let them continue to participate until they reached the age of 18 (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson).

music theory, drama, vocal technique, dance movement, and stagecraft ("Eubie Blake Youth;" LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). The theatre moved several times and each move influenced the racial composition of the child attendees. When housed at the Universal Life Church and upon its move from the church to 76th Street children of many races attended, but when AMAS moved to its 104th Street location Latino and Black children became the EBYT majority (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). In 1972, Black and Puerto Rican children comprised eighty percent of EBYT, but because the program's reputation for excellence had grown, ten years later white children came from as far as New Jersey to participate (Allsopp D1; LeNoire Intv. by Hutson).

In addition to offering the aforementioned classes to youth, much like the Harlem Children's Theatre Company, professionalism and education about the business aspects of the performance industry were emphasized through student exposure to and training in résume preparation, audition techniques, nutrition, hygiene, casting sources and headshots ("Eubie Blake Youth"). As LeNoire stated, "They are young adults, we treat them like it" (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). EBYT emphasized professionalism both in attitude and in practice and expected students to treat every rehearsal as a professional environment; LeNoire believed "It is to their [students'] benefit to learn such discipline at an early age" ("Eubie").

Professionalism was not to be achieved at the expense of the children's educational and social well-being, however. As an internal memo written on LeNoire's behalf to differentiate between the purpose of AMAS and EBYT states: "It has never been the intention of the Eubie Blake Youth Theatre to workshop new theatrical material; AMAS develops new plays, EBYT develops children" (Genovese). LeNoire allowed parents to wait for their children in a separate room during classes or rehearsals (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). The maximum weekly rehearsals to

prepare for the annual production numbered three, and with the exception of the technical rehearsal lasting late into the night, rehearsals ended by 6 pm on school nights (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). Whether her students acted in the annual production or attended classes did not affect LeNoire's goals for EBYT students, which included learning the meaning and "coloring" of words, politeness, and hygiene along with singing and dancing (LeNoire Intv. by Hatch). In one interview, LeNoire spoke about "sneaking" education into the EBYT program, which is most likely part of the reason she required all children to bring dictionaries with them and look up unfamiliar words which arose during classes or rehearsals (LeNoire Intv. by Hatch; LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). LeNoire held her students accountable for their academic performance; not only did she require students to present her with their report cards, but she also suspended them from participation for one month if the reports were not "positive" (Spencer 23). Perhaps consequently, LeNoire believed all of the students' grades had improved since attending EBYT (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). Obviously this action filtered out students who did not earn high academic marks, which does not mean that the improvement in overall grades happened because of the program, it could have been from "weeding out" the low-achieving students.

Child nutrition concerned LeNoire greatly as evidenced by the frequency with which she broached the topic in interviews and articles. She emphasized child nutrition and its connection of EBYT in both the 1971 interview with James Hatch and in the 1982 interview with Jean Hutson. In the former, LeNoire stated that EBYT provides food to the child participants and laughingly said, "I'm not sure if they come in for the class or the food, but they are coming, and that's the important thing!" (LeNoire Intv. by Hatch). In 1972, she talked about needing help from milk and food companies to feed the children who come because they spend their lunch

money on transportation to get to the theatre (Allsopp D1). By 1982, it seems that EBYT's practice of providing food to their young charges had changed; in the Hutson interview, LeNoire spoke of each child being required to bring a healthy lunch with her or him at every Saturday class (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson).

EBYT strove to be a steward of "self-awareness, tolerance, and racial harmony" as part of the overarching mission of AMAS (AMAS). This stewardship occurred through the process of theatrical creation with young people. In 1985, EBYT youth participants were asked, "What does AMAS mean to you" and some of the unedited answers were published in the theatre's newsletter: The children wrote about its importance to future careers in show business, enjoyment, and how the theatre felt like home (AMAS "Newsletter" Mar. 1985). One girl summed up her experience with AMAS in this way: "AMAS to me means love, working, caring, sharing, singing and dancing. AMAS means being able to be yourself. AMAS means togetherness. AMAS means happiness" (Shatesha Simon qtd. in AMAS "Newsletter" Mar. 1985, 3).

Unlike AMAS's mission to create new works, EBYT produced extant musicals written for adults and cast them with children. Underlying this practice was LeNoire's vision that theatre should not be easy work (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). In 1982, LeNoire said point blank, "I don't believe in doing children's shows with children" (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). What she meant is that children should perform in shows for adult and family audiences and adults should perform in shows for child audiences. LeNoire wanted to create a challenging environment for her students and believed "book shows" more difficult for children to perform than plays like *Alice in Wonderland* or fairy tales (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). The age-appropriateness or lack thereof

in a musical's content did not seem to be a concern to LeNoire, which sets her apart from mainstream Theatre for Youth practices at this time.

Little information exists in print regarding the EBYT production history during its early years. I have assembled an incomplete production history based on archival print and audio material. Every EBYT production was a musical and the first I have on record in 1977 is Sandy Wilson's musical *The Boy Friend*, about love and mistaken identity set in the French Riviera in the 1920s ("Benefit"). Two shows which took place before 1982 include *Finian's Rainbow* and Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson). The former is a whimsical tale in which a pot of gold is buried by an Irish immigrant, a leprechaun attempts to avoid becoming human, and a racist U.S. senator is temporarily turned Black. *The Mikado* focuses on the pursuit of love in a fictional Japanese village where the punishment for flirting is death; according to a 2010 *Chicago Sun-Times* article, the musical "has been in constant production for the past 125 years" (Steinberg). Both Kern and Hammerstein's *Showboat* and Charles Strouse's *The Nightingale* took place in 1982 (LeNoire Intv. by Hutson).[119] *Showboat* follows the story of several riverboat performers and one of its major plot points involves the reveal of the racial identity of a lead character as "mulatto" and the resulting social fallout. *The Nightingale*, based on a story by Hans Christian Andersen, is a one-act opera wherein a Chinese emperor learns that his money cannot be used to purchase happiness. In January of 1985, EBYT performed Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* about a young orphan based on the Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist* (AMAS "Newsletter" Mar. 1985).

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[119]. Charles Strouse also wrote the Broadway musical *Annie*.

Interestingly the issues of race and racial identity appear in several of the plays EBYT produced. Because of the lack of production information about the EBYT versions, however, it is impossible to determine how LeNoire and her artistic team addressed this issue with their young cast members. One is left to wonder if all of the EBYT productions used "colorblind casting," or if the race of the child actors determined the casting choices in a play where race played an essential role in the plot, such as *Showboat* or *Finian's Rainbow*. Though LeNoire spoke at length about EBYT in general, she provided no specific information about these productions or about how she approached casting with young people. Furthermore, EBYT productions appear to have received no coverage in *New York Amsterdam News* or *The New York Times*. The large amount of material on AMAS at the Schomburg Center for Black Culture only includes a single file about EBYT which contains no production information.

Because in some years various aspects of EBYT received more press coverage than others, I can make generalizations about the functions and logistics of this long-running company, but I am unable to provide a detailed overview of EBYT in each year of its existence. By examining many articles and the two aforementioned interviews with LeNoire, I can report with certainty some of the classes offered and ascertain that the class topics varied by year; in 1971, for example, the EBYT offered classes in singing, middle-eastern dancing, advanced singing, and advanced acting classes (LeNoire Intv. by Hatch). In 1972, AMAS offered classes on Thursday, Fridays and Saturdays in Vocal Coaching, North African Dance, Acting and Character Analysis, Cinematography, Guitar, Ballet and Jazz Dance, Drawing and Painting, and Children's Theatre (Allsopp D1). The students who attended these classes ranged in age from 10 years old to 62 (Allsopp D1). Also in 1972, 41 students aged five through 15 years old

participated in EBYT and worked with four adult teachers and three consultants (LeNoire Intv. by Hatch).

EBYT received program funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council of the Arts ("Benefit"). In order to supplement this income to fund "weekly dramatic, dance, and vocal coaching for underprivileged children of all races, colors, and creeds from New York and the surrounding areas" an EBYT scholarship fund was created ("Benefit"). Some well-known Blacks in the entertainment industry served on the scholarship fund honorary committee including Harry Belafonte, Bill Cosby, Micki Grant, Rita Moreno, and Vivian Robinson ("Benefit").

Despite her age, LeNoire stayed at the helm of AMAS until 1994, when Donna Trinkoff assumed the role of Artistic Director, a position she still holds ("Staff"). LeNoire passed away at the age of 90 in 2002 ("Rosetta LeNoire" 56).[120] LeNoire's vision for AMAS seems to have persisted in her absence: As a page on the AMAS website describing LeNoire states, "It is because of Rosetta's strength of spirit and mind that AMAS, after three decades, continues to promote multiculturalism and racial tolerance in the New York City Community" ("Founder"). Although LeNoire's legacy continues, so do the financial difficulties which have threatened the theatre's existence since the 1980s, and like all non-profit theatres, AMAS must rely on donations in order to survive. In 1982, an administrator at AMAS reported that

[120]. She spent the last few years of her life at the Lillian Booth Actors Home of the Actors Fund in Englewood, New Jersey (Braverman 2006).

> Each show cost a minimum of $16,000 in terms of real expenses; production costs, rent, and administration. The Children's Theatre [Eubie Blake Youth Theatre] and adult shows bring in virtually nothing. We're not just non-profit from a legal standpoint; we could not operate any other way. (Lapidus qtd. in Norflett 72)

The NEA and New York State Council of the Arts currently sponsor AMAS; the theatre receives additional funding from theatre foundations such as Actors' Equity and the Shubert Foundation from corporate sponsors (AMAS "Corporate"). Despite its struggles, AMAS still attracts and publicly recognizes "big names" in the entertainment industry: In March 2010, AMAS awarded Dionne Warwick and producer/director Woodie King, Jr. "Rosie" Awards, named after LeNoire for "their lifelong humanitarian and theatrical achievements" ("Newsletter"). The governing structure of AMAS includes a Board of Directors as well as an Advisory Board: two well-known performers currently serving as advisors include Ruby Dee and Tamara Tunie ("Board").[121] As of 2003, the theatre's operating budget stood at $400,000 (Pogrebin E1).

The youth theatre LeNoire began in Eubie Blake's honor continues under the moniker The Rosetta LeNoire Musical Theatre Academy (AMAS "Educational"). At most thirty youth ages 14-20 enroll in the program annually and attend classes all day Saturdays and some Sundays beginning in October and ending in May (AMAS "Educational"). The AMAS website

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[121]. Tunie plays the medical examiner on the long-running television program *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*.

describes the program as "pre-professional": Students, eighty-five percent of whom receive full or partial scholarships, work with professionals to learn acting, improvisation, singing, dance, creative writing, and technical theatre (AMAS "Educational"). As LeNoire originally designed EBYT, the Academy culminates in a fully-produced musical staged in an Off-Off-Broadway theatre for a two-week run in which the youth participants star (AMAS "Educational"). Overall, not much appears to have changed in terms of the program's function, enrollment limits, and content over the years. The ages of the youth allowed to participate, however, has changed from allowing elementary school children in to increasing the age minimum to 14. Also, though the program focuses solely on musicals, the artistic range of productions has expanded beyond only "book shows," though they continue to be its mainstay.[122] For example, in 1998 the Academy put up an original musical based on Studs Terkel's book *Working* based on interviews with working Americans and in 1999 created a revue called *Virtual Families* which focused on the variety of family compositions as portrayed in scenes from several plays, including August Wilson's *Fences* ("Spare Times" E38; "Family Fare" E41). AMAS's educational programming now includes several in-school residencies which bring teaching artists to classrooms to work directly with elementary, middle, and high school youth; school administrators can choose from residency topics including the Civil Rights Movement, ancient cultures, musical theatre, immigration, world culture and heroes in culture (*Education*). On its website AMAS states that the purposes of the theatre's education program as, "Bringing young people together to study and

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[122]. For example, in 2010 the Academy productions were *The Pajama Game*, in 2009 *No, No, Nanette*, in 2004 *Godspell*, etc. (Graeber C34 May 2010; "For Children" E44; Graeber C36 May 2009).

work in musical theatre, promoting empathy for others, self-awareness, teamwork, and racial harmony, has [sic] always been a basic tenet of our mission" (*Education*).

In her theatre for adults, LeNoire succeeded in setting the example that Blacks and other races could work together in theatre cooperatively and, in so doing, became a trailblazer of the non-traditional casting movement, sometimes known as "colorblind casting" ("Profile-Rosetta").[123] In fact, her work on the forefront of this movement inspired Actors Equity Association to create the Rosetta LeNoire Annual Award in 1989 (and named LeNoire the first recipient) to be given each year to "an individual, theatre, or producing organization with an exemplary record in the hiring or promotion of ethnic minorities, female actors and actors with disabilities through multi-racial and/or non-traditional casting" and who exemplify "artistic contributions to the universality of the human experience in the American Theatre" (Actors' Equity; "Historical"). This formal recognition by such a mainstream organization highlights further the disconnect which existed between BAM tenets and LeNoire's work with AMAS.

Mainstream culture outside of the theatrical world has also recognized LeNoire's contributions. In 1985, the Office of Black Ministry of the Archdiocese of New York chose her

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[123]. This type of casting refers to putting an actor in a role not originally written for the sex, race, ethnicity, ability/disability of the actor. The practice, although relatively common in contemporary theatre, has drawn ire from its inception and continues to be criticized by those who believe the practice damages the artistic vision of the playwright and also by those who contend that new theatre needs to be developed to explore alternative lived experiences rather than attempting to re-envision past works.

as one of two recipients of the Pierre Toussaint Medallion, "given for outstanding service to the African American Community in the areas of freedom, human rights and spiritual values" (Spencer 23). April 19, 1994 was named "Rosetta LeNoire Day" in New York City ("Founder"). In 1999, LeNoire received a National Medal of the Arts from President Bill Clinton who spoke of LeNoire's personal success at the presentation ceremony and added,

> But with all her talent and drive through the years, discrimination was never far behind. So Rosetta did more than dream of a theater with no color bar, she actually built one. For more than 30 years, the AMAS Musical Theatre in New York City has been a place where performers are judged by the caliber of their skills, not the color of their skin. As a courageous child, Rosetta learned that sometimes you have to break things to put them in the right place. Today America thanks her for breaking barriers to set our Nation right. ("Rosetta LeNoire" 57; Clinton 1626)

Considering LeNoire's tremendous influence on past and current theatrical casting practices it is surprising that she has remained virtually unknown in academia, whereas the short-lived theatrical practices based in part on violent manifestos of the Black Arts Movement have been studied *ad nauseum*.[124] It is my hope that by studying AMAS's youth theatre in this dissertation other scholars will discover and further explore LeNoire's important legacy.

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[124]. The scholarly work on LeNoire and/or AMAS is limited to an interview with LeNoire transcribed in Schwartz's *Voices of the Federal Theatre* and Norflett's 1983 dissertation. Additionally, LeNoire is one of the interviewee's in the 2006 documentary *Curtain Call* about

Conclusion

When I began this project, I was easily able to locate three, and only three, facts about Black Theatre for Youth during the Black Arts Movement era. The first I learned from reading Mike Sell's chapter "The Black Arts Movement: Performance, Neo-Orality, and the Destruction of the 'White Thing'" in Harry J. Elam, Jr. and David Krasner's anthology *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, was that Sonia Sanchez had written *Malcolm/Man Don't Live Here No Mo'* to be performed by and for Black children. The second and third facts I gleaned from McCaslin's *Theatre for Children in the United States: A History*, where she states that two theatre companies serving primarily Black youth existed and were called Harlem Children's Theatre Company and the Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk. My findings have attempted to "fill in the blanks" left by other Black Theatre and Theatre for Youth historians who have devoted little attention, and even less critical attention, to Black Theatre for Youth. This dissertation shows that Theatre for Youth aimed at children of color is not a new phenomenon in the U.S. coming out of attempts at "political correctness;" rather, Black Theatre for Youth actually dates back to pageants aimed at Black children during the Harlem Renaissance. My study implies that Black Theatre for Youth during the Black Arts Movement warrants more coverage than just one line or two in Theatre for Youth history texts and that even the works of these five New York city area companies showed tremendous variety in terms of

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aging performers at the Actors' Fund Retirement Home. Sadly, the edited interview misses the opportunity to report about LeNoire's many accomplishments and instead focuses on her godfather, Bill "BoJangles" Robinson.

type of work produced, philosophy of working with children, engagement with political agendas, and "success" as defined by company duration.

This dissertation focused on the Harlem Children's Theatre Company, the Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk, National Black Theatre, Spirit House, and AMAS Repertory Eubie Blake Youth Theatre, five theatre companies which produced Theatre for Youth in the New York City region during the Black Arts Movement. In my analysis, I endeavored to discern the extent to which the Black Aesthetic and other ideologies prominent in BAM, such as Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism, influenced Theatre for Youth productions at each company in order to produce an image of the Black child. I examined the material conditions in which the companies existed; for example, the racial demographics of the children served by each theatre and how each company funded its work. The questions which framed this investigation were: How closely did plays for children adhere to the ideology of the Black Aesthetic wherein Afrocentrism ruled and Eurocentrism was detested? How did the legacy of minstrel portrayals of Black children affect the theatrical depiction of the child during BAM? How did the era's shifting material conditions and political climate contribute to onstage depictions of Black childhood? What functions did performances by children themselves play in this highly politically charged artistic movement?

The locations of these particular theatre companies in proximity to the New York City area put them near much Black Arts Movement theatrical activity. Of particular interest to me was whether theatre for Black children during this highly politically charged era resisted political themes in content and produced "safe" theatre "appropriate for children" (as did the majority of mainstream Theatre for Youth of this time). I wondered if instead the inverse was true: Did highly political plays such as Sonia Sanchez's *Malcolm/Man Don't Live Here No Mo'* and Amiri

Baraka's *Board of Education* represent the genre of Black Theatre for Youth produced in this geographic region during the era or were they the genre's exceptions? Either way, I found an examination of the five companies invaluable to producing a more accurate picture of the history of American Theatre for Youth upon which scholarship has focused almost exclusively on white children for far too long. Furthermore, the majority of Black Theatre research has focused on theatre by and for adults. I have tried to bridge this gap in both fields with this study.

Rather than finding that most of the companies' works resembled the highly political and didactic Theatre for Youth plays of Sanchez and Baraka mentioned above, I discovered that the companies' repertoires did not appear to be majorly influenced by the Black Aesthetic. I use "majorly influenced" here in the sense of adhering to all three tenets of Larry Neal's 1968 treatise: 1) fusion of all art with politics, 2) all audiences people of color, i.e. no whites, and 3) ascription to communitarian values (29-39). Harlem Children's Theatre Company plays, for example, combined art with politics; its founder and principal playwright Aduke Aremu stated that she viewed theatre as a means of doing political commentary. Yet, audiences of all races were welcome at HCTC shows and Aremu admitted children of all races into the company. Similarly, although Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk intended much of its productions to be culturally and socially relevant to its primarily Black audience, it too embraced cultural diversity in its programmatic offerings for children. Indeed, not all of its productions fused art with politics, especially when one considers that puppet shows on apolitical themes were a mainstay of its repertoire for young people. Regarding community and communitarian values, an extended family concept applied at Spirit House Afrikan Free School, at National Black Theatre's School for the Development of Intuitive and God-Conscious Thought, and at Harlem Children's Theatre

Company. Of the five companies, it is evident that Baraka's Young Spirit House Movers and Players productions demonstrated greatest allegiance to BAM tenets which stands to reason when one takes into account that Baraka is considered by many to be one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement, and is considered by his Spirit House followers to be the "father" of BAM.

Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism both were often portrayed on the stages of Harlem Children's Theatre Company, Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk, National Black Theatre, and Spirit House. In fact, in many ways the Pan-African programming of Harlem Children's and Billie Holiday resembled one another in that both focused on African and Caribbean elements in productions. All four of the above companies also ascribed to Afrocentrism in that the vast majority of their works were in some way related to the experience(s) of being Black. Afrocentrism and Pan-Africanism manifested aesthetically in the works of Harlem Children's and National Black as the two company founders, Barbara Ann Teer of NBT and Aremu of HCTC, each traveled to Africa and came to incorporate production elements they had studied and experienced abroad into their productions. Another aesthetic influence on National Black which is readily categorized as Afrocentric is the Black Church in the U.S. Regarding content, at Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk, three of four plays in resident company Bubble Gum Players' repertoire were Afrocentric: *Bed-Stuy Story*, *And the Sun God Said That's Hip*, and *The Me Nobody Knows.* Only one company in this study, the AMAS Eubie Blake Youth Theatre, refrained from Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism and focused instead on producing mainstream musicals with child performers and casting without regard to race.

Although not stated outright in Neal's writing about the Black Aesthetic and the Black Arts Movement, embedded within much of the movement's literature aimed at adults is a focus on and preoccupation with negativity. I do not state this to decry BAM literature for adults: Obviously Black artists of this era had much to be negative about regarding quotidian instances of racism and prejudice, unequal access to employment and material goods, lack of quality housing, police brutality, etc. Yet this is an important division between the Black Theatre for Youth companies studied here and the greater BAM movement. Of the three theatres located in Harlem in my study, Eubie Blake Youth Theatre, Harlem Children's Theatre Company and National Black Theatre youth productions all focused on positive, uplifting aspects of life. In fact, both Faison of NBT and Aremu described their work with youth as "Pro-Black, not anti-white". This doesn't mean that the companies located in Harlem were engaged in Polyanna-like thinking. Each company addressed very real social problems, such as the need for Black self-determination in Harlem Children's *Babylon II*, racism in Eubie Blake Youth Theatre's *Finian's Rainbow*, and the need for Black children to discover their own identities free from minstrel stereotypes at National Black. However, the means by which each of these companies engaged with social issues seems hopeful, optimistic, and intended to inspire positive social change.

Each theatre company in this study had specific goals in its work with youth, which often had nothing to do with theatre itself. In terms of teaching children how to succeed, Abisola Faison at National Black and Aremu at Harlem Children's both believed that having the experience of working with theatre at their respective companies enabled children to create the life they desired and to be successful in whatever field they chose. At National Black, Abisola Faison believed that the children's creation of their own theatre with adults was a way for them

to exercise their creativity to further their personal development. To Aremu, being involved creatively in theatre helped children develop their emotional intelligence as well as other forms of intelligence not historically valued in formal academic settings. Eubie Blake Youth Theatre and Harlem Children's both stressed professionalism of young company members. Also like Harlem Children's, Eubie Blake Youth Theatre stressed academic achievement and suspended under-performing students from the program. Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk's program coordinator Brabham perceived a correlation between participation in theatre and higher reading scores. LeNoire viewed the function of children performing in theatre as a way for them to train for professional theatre careers and her company offered opportunities to perform in leading roles regardless of skin color. Eubie Blake Youth Theatre's purpose was to help Black children develop emotionally, receive support from others in the community, and to learn to truly love themselves.

I came across minstrel stereotypes often in the course of my research. Such occurrences varied from LeNoire's testimony of being called an "Uncle Tom" when trying to establish her multiracial theatre company to Baraka criticizing white culture's portrayal of Blacks as "Uncle Toms" and mammy stereotypes in the text of his unnamed play which aired on "Inside Bed-Stuy". For the most part, the minstrel legacy regarding depictions of children was less apparent than what I expected. Rather than the children involved in the theatre companies' productions having to work against the negative "picaninny" and "Topsy" stereotypes, the adult mentors who worked *with* these children would have been most severely affected. The use of caricatured images of Black children to entertain and to market products commonly took place throughout *their* childhoods and those of their parents. Thus, it is likely that many adults who worked with

Black children at these theatre companies felt similarly to AMAS founder LeNoire who admitted that she grew up ashamed to be Black. As adults, in their work with young people, these theatre practitioners found ways to present Black children as multi-faceted human beings and sought to erase for good the stereotypes of Black children as entertaining, mischievous, dirty, and animal-like.

Black children during the 1960s and 1970s were much more likely to live in poverty than white children; this material fact clearly affected many aspects of the theatre companies. For example, Harlem Children's Theatre Company provided scholarships for children to attend classes and the Billie Holiday resident youth company Bubble Gum Players' productions of *Me Nobody Knows* and *The Bed-Stuy Story* depicted urban poverty onstage. Furthermore, LeNoire expressed what she felt as a need to provide children with healthy lunches, worried they would not receive proper nutrition elsewhere. In the most pointed example of some of the children's material conditions, Aremu made it a priority that the Harlem Children's casts stay in upscale hotels in Europe to show them that another kind of life was possible. Ironically, it was the poverty of the Harlem and Brooklyn neighborhoods which helped the Harlem Children's Theatre Company, Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk, National Black Theatre, and Eubie Blake Youth Theatre come into existence. Government funding of arts organizations in areas deemed "ghettos" and cities "likely to erupt in racial violence" in the late 1960s and early 1970s helped give many theatre groups their start. These four companies also received much financial support from the New York State Council on the Arts which served as a major contributor to Black theatre arts programming. In the course of my research, I found evidence that all theatres with the exception of Spirit House relied primarily on government and private grants and donations;

the majority of funding did not come from ticket sales.[125] In addition to fiscal support, these four companies received the benefit of belonging to the Black Theatre Alliance and all were either themselves recognized by AUDELCO or had company members or associated artists received recognition.

Children themselves performed plays at each company and the functions of these performances varied by company. The question of child agency remains elusive in this study as it always is when one attempts to parse out true agency when adults work with children. After careful consideration regarding who decided which plays to perform and how to perform them, the only theatrical company in which children demonstrated a great amount of agency in co-creation of theatre activities was through National Black Theatre's workshops with children and the company's DIG theatre activities. However, children co-created *Land of the Egyptians* with Aremu at Harlem Children's and the Bubble Gum Players at Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk's play *The Bed Stuy Story* was based on the neighborhood children's lived experiences. Baraka used child actors as a vehicle at Spirit House to push forward his political agenda. Although the children seemed to function as agents in *Board of Education* and the "Inside Bed-Stuy" unnamed play in reality they were commodified. By contrast, even though Aremu used Theatre for Youth as political commentary, she also believed that the function of children within the Black Arts Movement was to educate themselves and to create their own destiny.

[125]. I was unable to locate any information about how Spirit House funded its theatre activities for adults or for youth.

My research was limited by several factors. I was unable to read the majority of the plays I have written about because published editions do not exist. Rare exceptions are Baraka's two plays for youth, *Board of Education* and the unnamed play presented in the "Inside Bed-Stuy" television program in 1968 which I was able to transcribe from the videorecording. None of the Harlem Children's Theatre Company scripts are published; in order to write about them I had to rely on my three interviews with Aremu and newspaper reviews. In the cases where plays were published, such as Billie Holiday Theatre for Little Folk's *The Me Nobody Knows*, Paul Sills' *Story Theatre*, and the musical productions put up by Eubie Blake Youth Theatre, I could not identify many, if any, primary materials about the productions themselves. Although I went into this project knowing that AMAS and National Black Theatre kept archival records of their productions, my ability to gain access to both of these companies' records was more limited than expected.

Likewise, I attempted to set up a visit to the National Black Theatre and interview with Abisola Faison well before I arrived in Harlem for my research trip; however, despite numerous emails and phone calls to the theater I could only secure a telephone interview with Faison. Shirley Faison agreed to meet with me at the talent agency she heads, but she informed me that NBT's archives are digital and that next to nothing about the children's theatre programming was contained in the digital archive. I corresponded with Donna Trinkoff, the current Artistic Director of AMAS who said that they did have historical production information in boxes at their office in New York City but did not have anyone who could go through them to determine whether or not there was any information in their files about Eubie Blake Youth Theatre productions. Because I could not gain access to the production files, there remains a gap in my

knowledge regarding how AMAS dealt with "colorblind" casting, especially in shows like *Showboat* and *Finian's Rainbow* in which race plays a central role in plot.

In the course of my research, I discovered other aspects of Black Theatre for Youth which warrant greater examination. One such topic I wanted to explore is the construction of gender in Black Theatre for Youth during the Black Arts Movement, which falls outside of the scope of this study. Another area which deserves greater attention is Black Educational Theatre (theatre with and for college students) in general and the children's theatre program at Howard University formerly run by Kelsey Collie in particular. A literary analysis of the plays I touched upon here, such as those in Aduke Aremu's Harlem Children's canon would make a fascinating study once those plays have been published or at least deposited at the Child Drama Archive at Arizona State University. Finally, future research could fill in the gaps left by my study, such as more specific production information about Eubie Blake Youth Theatre and Spirit House productions.

I hope that my research has contributed to a better understanding of how the image of the Black child was conceived of during the Black Arts Movement. Black Theatre for Youth as a field of study is rife with possibilities for examination as so few have attempted to uncover it. I also hope that this study inspires other scholars to explore it further.

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