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Douglas A. Jones Jr.

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Introduction: Slavery's Reinventions

DOUGLAS A. JONES, JR.

In his assessment of African and African-descended persons' dramaturgical function in and contributions to western theatre, "The Negro and the Stage" (1902), composer Bob Cole identified the corpus of stage adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) as the greatest achievement of American theatre culture. Cole, who was a principal of the artistic and managerial teams that produced the first black musicals, hailed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an amalgam of Stowe's genius and the African-American experience: it yielded "the only dramatic effort of American moulding, embodying every phrase of Americanism that Fair Columbia can rightly boast of" (303). Such pride in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became increasingly difficult to locate among black critics and audiences over the next few decades, as they grew weary of seeing black people in chains, again, beaten and degraded. As Cole put it, "Most refrain from seeing it because it appears brutal, and especially in these times of racial prejudice. Most feel somewhat belittled when they watch the chase of the bloodhounds, the heartless slave sale, the inhuman whipping post, the murder of Uncle Tom by the heartless Legree" (304). Cole prevailed on his readers to regard *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from another direction – that is, as a pitiable tale of "the primitive white American" and his "inherent brutality" (304) – but the incipient modernist sensibilities that began to organize the black cultural zeitgeist at the fin de siècle rendered Cole's plea largely nugatory.

Those sensibilities also reflected a disillusionment with the characterological features and mawkish trappings common to stagings of slavery in the period. The philosopher Alain Locke captured this sentiment in his epoch-defining essay "The New Negro" (1925): "The day of 'aunties,' 'uncles,' and 'mammies' is equally gone. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on [. . .]. The popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts" (443). In "The Drama of Negro Life," Locke called for a folk drama "of free self-expression and imaginative release" that "has no objective but to express beautifully and colorfully the folk life of the race" (124). And while he countenanced plays that worked through the history of slavery to mine African "folk lore, art-idioms and symbols" for the "development of a thoroughly racial drama" (126) – that is, a black folk drama – other black moderns pressed

for the end of slavery as a dominant topos of American theatre culture. They wanted audiences to reckon with narratives based in the aims and struggles of the present; in their view, slavery and its representations were too bothersome and too vexed to do the work of “shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority” and “achieving something like a spiritual emancipation” – of becoming New Negroes (Locke, “New” 443).

Such wrangles over the dimensions and propriety of slavery in theatre and other realms of cultural production recur in (African) American cultural theory. For the first one hundred years after Emancipation, interest in slavery ebbed and flowed among audiences and readers. But in the mid-1960s, with the “formation of a contemporary discourse of slavery” in Anglo-American historiography and its appropriation by activists to describe the era’s “social conditions and political processes,” slavery began to emerge as a historical–cultural matrix with which one had to come to terms in order to understand the interrelation of power, race, and representation in the present (Rushdy 5–6). Since then, engagements with the history of slavery in both rarefied and popular cultures have increased steadily, a proliferation that suggests that the further we get away from that history, the more we crave its concepts, logics, objects, and tropes in our imaginative and critical endeavours. On the one hand, slavery’s brutal sublimities are fertile terrain for artistic originality, and the innovative forms and figures of artists working this terrain have unleashed a flourishing of creativity. On the other, many find in the historicity of slavery explanatory frameworks with which to account for, and thereby help redress, persistent forms of race-based inequities and exclusions. In either case, slavery becomes “slavery,” as Hortense Spillers theorizes it, a discursive “reinvention” that “every generation of systematic readers is compelled” to make because slavery “remains one of the most textualized and discursive fields of practice that we could posit for a structure of attention” (179).

What pushes artists and their audiences to return to slavery is the institution’s constitutive opacities, which perhaps ironically serve as a wellspring of expressive innovation, critical intervention, and world-making. Their reinventions signify the pursuit of a history that refuses historiographic consummation. To reinvent slavery, in other words, is to contribute to a creative, intellectual, or political project that is fundamentally distinct from (even as it draws upon) the conditions and experiences of the enslaved. When Toni Morrison sought to access the “interior life” of slaves, to “rip that veil” (91) of decorum that the bourgeois protocols of literary abolitionism demanded of slave narrators, for instance, she knew “[o]nly the act of the imagination” could help her navigate the abyss that confronted her on the other side (92). In the fruits of Morrison’s literary enterprise, especially *Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy* (2008), slavery functions chiefly as a mediating proxy for (racialized) power

relations, modes of subjugation, and familial obligations in her post-slavery present. Her novels and criticism have furnished the prevailing interpretive terms with which scholars explicate artistic engagements with slavery, resulting in paradigms biased toward textuality, which habitually slight embodied forms of cultural production such as theatre.

To address this deficit in the critical and theoretical literatures, the articles in this issue examine the aesthetic, affective, and phenomenological properties of theatrical reinventions of slavery. Collectively, the conceptual frameworks they formulate to read those properties help explain the shifts and tendencies in American theatre culture's longstanding investment in slavery as both subject and setting. Amiri Baraka demanded that audience members take stock of their role in the perpetuation of slavery – a demand that shaped the dramaturgical structure of his *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* (1967), for example. Such an approach, shared by other experimental plays of the 1960s, has become dominant among playwrights working in mainstream contemporary theatre. As Tina Post shows in her article “‘Is That What We Wanted?': Staging Slavery's Affective Scripts,” popular new plays such as Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *An Octoroon* (2014) and Jennifer Kidwell and Scott R. Sheppard's *Underground Railroad Game* (2016) require that audiences take part in the action: the former play solicits audience members to join in a slave auction scene, which many have done to chilling effect, while the titular game of the latter play conscripts its audiences into the Confederate or Union armies and promises them rewards for either catching or helping runaway slaves. In both instances, audiences find themselves caught up in a ludic frivolity centred on some of slavery's most brutal practices. The frolicsome relation encouraged by *An Octoroon* and *Underground Railroad Game* flouts the solemn and melancholic attachments with the slave past that audiences expect from slavery's reinventions. That relation, moreover, intimates a more general question about pedagogies of/in history that organizes how a good deal of contemporary theatre treats the past: is it “possible to learn from history without revelling in it” (560)?

Of course, one only achieves these effects by dint of the ontology of live performance. That is, the affective and intellectual formations that emerge from theatricalized reinventions of slavery do so only because of “our sensory engagement with [their] empirical objects” (States 6). Endowing objects with what Stacie Selmon McCormick calls a “phenomenal heaviness,” performance offers audiences encounters with the iconography of slavery in ways that literature cannot (523). In “‘Stories that Never Stop': Fugitivity and Neo-Slave Performance,” McCormick considers how such phenomenal heaviness constitutes performance's singular ability to reinvent not only slavery but also the most famous of its twentieth-century reinventions: the genre of the neo-slave

narrative. First emerging in the mid-1960s, the neo-slave narrative draws on and reimagines the aesthetic features of the antebellum slave narrative. Scholarly treatments almost always centre on how the genre takes shape as a novel, but the novelistic “engagement with slavery tracks thematically and concurrently” with its development in drama (535n2). The two plays McCormick takes up – Lydia Diamond’s *Harriet Jacobs* (2008) and Nathan Alan Davis’s *Nat Turner in Jerusalem* (2016) – exemplify how, in “each staged iteration,” neo-slave performance “shifts and thereby denies archival containment of the sort that produced the original representations, which the plays repudiate” (518).

Several other articles in this issue consider the generic effects of staging slavery. In “Kno’ You’re Wally’: Reinventing Slavery, Family, and Nation in Pauline Hopkins’s *Peculiar Sam, or The Underground Railroad*,” Marvin McAllister examines how cultural production by slaves informed the dynamics of the first musical drama by an African American, written in 1879. A perfunctory study of *Peculiar Sam* suggests a dramaturgically lax vehicle for the comedic and musical talents of its stars, but McAllister’s analysis reveals a “complex amalgamation of concertized, minstrelized, and romanticized re-enactments of slave culture designed to entertain and potentially reshape diverse audiences with competing theatrical tastes and visions of the nation’s future” (393). He finds that Hopkins’s appropriation of the deeply religious African-American concert tradition and of blackface minstrelsy was an example of the interpenetration of the sacred and the secular that organized much black performance in the post-Reconstruction era: blackface actors used spiritual melodies to reinvigorate well-worn dramatis personae, lyrics, and themes, while concert singers interspersed their programs with popular songs from the minstrel repertoire, albeit in their own distinctive choral arrangements. Notwithstanding the narrative and characterological conventions she employed to accommodate such musical versatility, Hopkins’s *Peculiar Sam* differs from “most fugitive slave narratives, literary or theatrical,” in its “emphasis not on the solo male runaway but on a family of escapees, primarily women intent on defining freedom on their own terms” (392).

Hopkins continued her dramatic experiments over the next several decades, writing the unperformed *How Time Flies*, published for the first time in the present issue. Among other features, the plot’s bewildering chronology, nebulous rendering of slavery and freedom, and spiritualist protagonist (whose supernatural powers go beyond the ability to speak to the dead) make *How Time Flies* an outlier of African-American dramaturgy in the period. Gabrielle Everett, who retrieved the play from archives at Fisk University and prepared it for publication in this issue, regards it as a pivotal transitional text not only in Hopkins’s oeuvre but also in the theory and practice of black writing more broadly. She writes, “White publishers, sociopolitical conditions, and even

prominent racial uplifters set constraints on fin-de-siècle black literary production. Yet writers like Hopkins not only exceeded the conventions of their historical moment. They also sometimes refused those they set for themselves" (427).

Although slavery is the primary subject of *How Time Flies*, the play's dramaturgical peculiarities nevertheless mark an attempt to move beyond the affective and formal hallmarks that Alain Locke and others rejected as too tied to the slave past and, thus, regressive for the race. Such developments in African-American dramaturgy reached an apotheosis in the folk drama of the late 1920s, which supplied major texts of not only the New Negro Renaissance but also the Little Theatre Movement that swept Europe and the United States during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Based in the "native soil" of black folk culture, as Locke called it ("American Stage" 121), these plays offer a dignified if gritty naturalism that repudiates the sensationalist and maudlin representations of blackness that pervaded American performance culture but hardly corresponded to the lives of actual black people. An exemplar of this corpus is Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Plumes* (1927), a compact one-act that tells the story of a poor mother, Charity, who must decide if she will spend her last monies on a medical procedure with no guarantees for her dying daughter or on a sumptuous funeral that will honour the girl as she's laid to rest. Johnson catalogued *Plumes* as one of her "Primitive Life Plays" because, as Sandy Alexandre argues in "Just Feathers: Righting Wrongs with Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Plumes*," these plays seem "to suggest that the absent presence of slavery in realist dramatizations of post-slavery black life demonstrates the interconnectedness of the past, present, and future and tasks the audience with making those connections in order to see slavery's ubiquity more clearly" (442). In other words, *Plumes* might not depict slavery per se, but the characters and concerns it presents were born directly of the institution as features of its sociological reinventions. Alexandre's analysis shows how Charity, in her fascination with funereal pageantry, represents "[b]lack people [who] surround themselves with these kinds of inspirational paraphernalia in order to affirm their sense of and experiences with the positive obverse of smear campaigns against black mothers" (451). More than an attempt to uphold the dictates of modernist racial folk drama, Johnson's delicate portrayal of Charity's quandary indicates a mind keenly familiar with the struggles of persons enduring the immediate after-effects of slavery.

Indeed, Johnson belonged to what theorist Marianne Hirsch terms a "post-memory" generation: "Postmemory," as Hirsch writes, "describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up" (106). Hirsch's notion of postmemory entails a very specific temporal

location for historical trauma, and that location sets the parameters within which a playwright like Johnson might attend to that trauma. Given that her generation is likewise gone, and in light of the ever-increasing distance between the slave past and now, paradigms like “the afterlife of slavery” and “in the wake of slavery” more accurately describe black people’s current relationship to that history – more accurate because more nebulous and capacious. According to Christina Sharpe, life “in the wake of slavery” is life replete with anti-blackness, which she figures in a climatological metaphor: “the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is anti-black” (104). In her reading of slavery’s reinventions in the drama of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), “The ‘Atmos-Feeling’ of Resurrection: Feeling Black (Not Slave) in Black Arts Movement Drama,” Margo Natalie Crawford finds that the plays anticipate and reject absolutist logics of the sort Sharpe posits:

[T]his naturalizing of anti-blackness differs from Baraka’s reinvention of slavery as an atmos-feeling that must be resisted in order to create “black space.” In the BAM’s ethos of black cultural nationalism, there was too much space for agency and resistance to let slavery become the all-determining air of black experience. (488)

Crawford teases out a theory of “atmos-feeling” in Baraka’s dramaturgy that she understands as the spatio-affective dimension of blackness that “refuses to accept this forced, everyday relation to death. What is radical, rather, is the feeling that blackness need not always already be tied to the status of the slave or the omnipresence of death” (485). Crawford’s article reveals the kind of intellectual formations we miss when we regard the present as fully over-determined by slavery’s necropolitics.

Langston Hughes and Aimé Césaire were two playwrights who worked through slavery’s brutalities to retrieve actions, idioms, and histories that might prove useful for their respective cultural and political projects. They turned to the slave rebellions in Saint-Domingue and the subsequent founding of the Republic of Haiti to offer their twentieth-century audiences more than a saga of black triumph: they hoped that staging the coming together of slaves, free Africans, and mulattoes for the overthrow of white colonialist rule would model and thus inspire networks of pan-African solidarity through which blacks across the globe might overcome racial and colonial oppression. In “‘It Cancels the Slave Ship!’: Africa, Slavery, and the Haitian Revolution in Langston Hughes’s *Emperor of Haiti* and Aimé Césaire’s *The Tragedy of King Christophe*,” Shane Graham writes that both playwrights

appropriated Haiti’s story of armed resistance to slavery and oppression for the larger story of a noble African past. Black people could take pride in this imagined past: it gave them a stake in modernity [. . .] while serving as

a bastion against the pressures of assimilation to French culture in Césaire's Martinique or to white supremacy in Hughes's United States. (459)

Graham's article theorizes how performances of Haitian slavery and its overthrow were vital to Césaire's elaboration of Hughes's cultural theory for his notion of Négritude. He argues that "the vernacular channels of continuity with the past that Hughes had cultivated offered Césaire" – and Négritude more generally – "a flexible and inclusive basis for cultural identity whose ephemerality he deem[ed] mo[st] desirable" (476). Thus, their plays posit slavery as engendering the affective and characterological prototypes that black people throughout the African diaspora should assume and develop in their efforts toward full self-determination as free modern subjects.

Hughes and Césaire arrive at such salutary ends because they practised what, according to Soyica Colbert, Eve Sedgwick would later term "reparative reading." Following Sedgwick, Colbert's "Reconstruction, Fugitive Intimacy, and Holding History" explains how the hermeneutics of reparative reading not only "accounts for histories of trauma and the incursion of the past in the present, but it also entails the possibility that those incursions may produce varied [e.g., positive], surprising outcomes" (504). Theatricalized reparative readings, however, intervene by way of the phenomenology of performance; their distinct interventions work on and through the affective and physical registers of assembled living bodies. Colbert calls this process "reconstruction" because it uses performance to "reshape the black *body* and its relationship to the *flesh*" (504; emphasis in original), and in so doing, it attends to the connection between material and discursive structures. Like Hughes's and Césaire's plays, Robert O'Hara's *Insurrection: Holding History* (1999) and Marcus Gardley's *...And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi* (2010) contribute to the work of reconstruction: these are dramas that refuse to depict characters "paralysed by the past's lethal sting" and instead "offer characters intervening in the history of slavery's ongoing effect on black embodiment. These characters model and embody forms of reconstruction that differ from the failed political attempts associated with the historical period that bears the name" (504). With a boisterous and magical theatricality, O'Hara and Gardley imagine pathways toward the reconstruction of (black) flesh still suffering from slavery's imprint.

If something like material reconstruction, fleshly or otherwise, is possible, practices of reparative reading will be essential to its realization. Reparative reading is only one methodology of reinventing slavery, but it is probably the most productive in terms of achieving civic reparations. The cunning and unctuous pandering of political elites notwithstanding, black people know that no substantial pecuniary act of redress is coming by way of the United States government – and they've known this for a very a long time. The ways in which artists, critics, and their publics have reinvented slavery in their

performance cultures and elsewhere is a testament to this political calculus. It is a testament, too, to how they have taken and continue to take it upon themselves to survive and thrive amidst racial slavery's reverberations.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND EDITOR

DOUGLAS A. JONES, JR. is Associate Professor of English at Rutgers University. He is the author of *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North* (U of Michigan P) and co-editor of *Race and Performance after Repetition* (forthcoming from Duke UP). His essays on (African) American literature and performance cultures have appeared in *Early American Literature*, *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*, *Modern Drama*, *TDR*, and elsewhere.