AUGUST WILSON AND BLACK AESTHETICS

Edited by Dana Williams
August Wilson
and
Black Aesthetics
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Edited by
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and
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Introduction
Dana A. Williams

Since 1990 when he won his second Pulitzer Prize for Drama, August Wilson has been among the most well-received and critically acclaimed playwrights in American theater. In 1996, however, his writing of plays took a back seat to his politics when he delivered his now infamous speech, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” before the Theatre Communications Group (TCG) in Princeton, New Jersey. Among other things, the speech articulated Wilson’s position regarding the appropriate function of black art, particularly black theater; his firm stance against colorblind casting to accommodate multiculturalism initiatives; and his belief that black theater is alive and well but underfunded. In these instances especially, the speech voiced a number of assertions that desperately needed to be heard.

First, he writes that “race matters” and argues that it is “the largest, most identifiable and most important part of our personality.” As platitudinous as the phrase “race matters” is, it is, perhaps, one of the most significant of Wilson’s assertions. If Wilson’s speech was effective at all, it was most effective in the sense that it forced Americans, once again, to think and to talk about race. As much as it informs and, in too many cases, controls society, race is still all too often not thought about or talked about by non–African Americans in meaningful ways. Robert Brustein’s suggestion that there should be a statute of limitation on white guilt about its past inhumanity to man speaks volumes to America’s denial of the significance of race to African Americans and non–African Americans alike in today’s society. But as Elmo Terry-Morgan so succinctly writes in Black Theatre Unprecedented Times, a special publication of Black Theatre News, “[…] the Black/White race war in America will not end peacefully until a critical mass of White folks acknowledge that racism is intricately woven into their cultural inheritance.”

The latter part of this statement—that “racism is intricately woven into [white people’s] cultural heritage”—I would argue, is the very point that Wilson tries to make with his comments about theater subscriptions and about critics who write from the position of cultural imperialists. Notably, the subscription audience at theaters that mount Wilson’s plays and other mainstream American plays alike is overwhelming white in more cases than not. And as long as the majority of subscription audiences are white, this
privileged audience “holds the seats of [the] theatres hostage to the mediocrity of its tastes, and serves to impede the further development of an audience” that is more likely to be attuned to the aesthetic values of non-white playwrights. Similarly, the white critic who writes from a position of privilege and through a belief system that adopts hegemonic values (with a white aesthetic as the standard to be met) does more damage to the growth of a diverse American theater than good. As Wilson suggests: “The critic who can recognize a German neo-romantic influence should also be able to recognize an American influence from blues and black church rituals, or any other contemporary American influence.” The absence of such an ability of a critic creates an unsurpassable disadvantage to the playwright who deviates from the mainstream or from the traditions with which critics are most familiar, particularly when these traditions and values privilege a white aesthetic over, say, a black aesthetic or for that matter a Latino, Native, or Asian American one. At least two questions that subsequently emerge from Wilson’s speech and which stand in desperate need of answers are how do past, present, and future traditions of black aesthetics penetrate a monolithic value system that draws almost exclusively from European or white ancestry? And since this single value system is being held firmly in place, do black plays, consequently, command being judged by aesthetic criteria that, at the very least, recognize their worth or difference?

Second, Wilson argues, “[t]here are and have always been two distinct and parallel traditions in black art: that art that is conceived and designed to entertain white society, and art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America by designing its strategies for survival and prosperity.” He contends that he and his art stand “squarely on the self-defining ground” of the latter tradition—a tradition he claims was birthed in the confines of the slave quarters as a source of survival and that reemerges as the “high ground of self-definition the black playwrights of the ’60s marked out for themselves.”

Buried within this rhetoric are some all-important inquiries—Is the basic function of (dramatic) black art different from the basic function of (dramatic) white art? Must all high-end or quality black theater speak to the black experience above all else? When given a stage, can African Americans afford not to be socio-political? Can art provide an avenue to political and cultural power? These seem to be the pressing questions that need to be answered before we can gain clarity about and adopt, willingly or grudgingly, a black aesthetic. And this aesthetic, though distinctively black, should and must meet an aesthetic criteria of excellence that assumes a posture of diversity, not sameness, and which incorporates into its standards and value system the contributions of all peoples rather than exclusively privileging only those of certain ancestry.

Third, much to the dismay of many black actors and any number of others, Wilson characterizes colorblind casting as “an aberrant idea that has never had any validity other than as a tool of the Cultural Imperialists who view American culture, rooted in the icons of European culture, as beyond reproach in its perfection.” Remove the totalizing and essentialist tone from Wilson’s description of colorblind casting, and one is left to admit that
colorblind casting did, indeed, emerge out of an initiative by cultural imperialists who, rather than adopt a real multicultural agenda, which would have included mounting more plays written by multicultural artists, instead, made a concession to impose a multicultural cast on a white standard. Principally, there is nothing wrong with an all-black cast of *Death of A Salesman*. But if it is mounted (in the name of multiculturalism) in lieu of a play that is truer to black experiences, for *Death of A Salesman* simply is not reflective of a general black experience, since few black men ever have the luxuries of the denials, delusions, and fantasies that Willie Loman experiences, then there is too much wrong with an all-black production of Miller’s play to be ignored. If black actors are cast in white roles, no matter how *universal*, largely for the sake of ensuring the employment of black actors (rather than mounting a black play) and to ensure funding from agencies that require some level of commitment to multiculturalism (again, rather than mounting a black play), colorblind casting is ineffective. In both cases—an all-black cast of a white play or the colorblind casting of a black actor in a white role—cultural imperialism still prevails. The standard seeking to be met is still mainstream and white. It fails to acknowledge the worth of black culture, for a black play is still left unproduced. Instead, it would seem, only the white play and, hence, the white experience, is worthy of being integrated or mimicked.

It is also true of both instances that “[…] identity politics allows the focus to remain on difference rather than forcing the dominant culture to look at the structure of inequality and exploitation that actually lie at the root of the continued marginalization of people of in the theatre.”¹⁰ In short, when colorblind casting is implemented by mainstream theaters exclusively or even primarily for the benefit of receiving funds from agencies that demand multiculturalist practices of them, everyone loses—minority plays are not mounted; minority actors lose the benefit of exploring their own experiences; and audiences are denied the possibilities of learning about others and of experiencing aesthetic diversity and growth. Clearly, the potential detriment outweighs the minimal benefits of employing colorblind casting in the name of multiculturalism. This, of course, is only one side of the argument for or against colorblind casting. But it is a side that Wilson rightly asserts must be strongly considered when funds are being issued to theaters which perpetuate a white standard and negate the value and worth of all others. The question, then, becomes *when and under what circumstances is colorblind casting an appropriate and viable option for the continued development and growth of African American theater?*

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Wilson issues a call to “black playwrights to confer with one another, to come together to meet each other face to face, to address questions of aesthetics” and, along with artists and actors, to “be the spearhead of a movement to reignite and reunite our people’s positive energy for a political and social change that is reflective of our spiritual truths […]”¹¹ In March 1998, the call was answered in the form of a weeklong summit, “On Golden Pond,” of forty-five key figures in African American theater, one of whom was my coeditor, Sandra G. Shannon;
a daylong conference, which was open to the public; and a second summit convened during the 1999 Black Theatre Network Conference. Accordingly, the essays included in this collection attempt to address issues raised either by Wilson’s initial speech or by the subsequent ideas and responses that emerged from the fruitfulness of the “gathering of the minds” at one or more of these venues.

The breadth of essays included here is among the collection’s strongest points, and each, in its own unique way, advances contemporary thought about black theater, black aesthetics, black intellectual thought, or black arts. Accordingly, we have divided the collection into four parts—Part I: Black Aesthetics as Theory, Art, and Ideology; Part II: Black Aesthetics and Interdisciplinary Black Arts; Part III: August Wilson’s Plays and Black Aesthetics; and Part IV: Interviews. This is followed by Sandra G. Shannon’s Afterword. Included in the Appendix is Sybil J. Roberts’s *A Liberating Prayer: A Lovesong for Mumia*. Included in Part I is Mikell Pinkney’s “The Development of African American Dramatic Theory: W.E.B. DuBois to August Wilson—Hand to Hand!” Pinkney’s essay (chapter 2) thoroughly maps a chronological history of theoretical writings concerning African American theatre from DuBois to the present and explores what Pinkney argues are the five basic aspects or fundamentals of African American dramatic philosophy—protest, revolt, assertion, music, and spirituality—in seven periods or developmental eras: the Plantation or Slave era, the American Minstrel era, the New Negro Renaissance era, the Assimilationist era, the Black Revolutionary era, the Afrocentric era, and the New Age post-Revolutionary movement. Ultimately, he argues that Wilson’s 1996 speech rearticulates the dramatic theories of DuBois, Baraka, and others, all of whom recognize and acknowledge black arts’ unique spiritual nature.

Following Pinkney’s historical overview of dramatic theory is Tracey Walters’s essay (chapter 3), which argues for the inclusion of African American authors who work in classical traditions into a broader vision of black aesthetics. Focusing on Rita Dove’s *Mother Love* and alluding to non-traditional playwrights like Adrienne Kennedy, Walters argues that Dove and any number of other African American writers who write in the classical tradition can also be rightly noted as writers who subscribe to a more liberal and variable articulation of black aesthetics. Though Dove clearly draws from classical mythology in *Mother Love*, careful analysis of the text, which Walters conducts, reveals both overt and covert references and allusions to black culture. Significantly, she points out that African American authors need not abandon nonblack traditions nor limit themselves exclusively to black cultural or literary traditions to be accepted as writers who make significant, though different, contributions to a working concept of black aesthetics.

In contrast to Walters, Georgene Bess Montgomery’s “The Ifa Paradigm: Reading the Spirit in Tina McElroy Ansa’s *Baby of the Family*” (chapter 4) offers a theory of reading select African American texts through a distinctly *Africanist* lens. In her essay, Montgomery argues that reading certain literary
texts through what she terms the *Ifa Paradigm* provides readers with a significantly different and substantively more meaningful way of interpreting symbols and ideas in certain diasporic texts. Ifa, she explains, is an ancient African spiritual system of the Yoruba tradition. While some spiritual leaders argue that the idea of Ifa belongs specifically to the Yoruba people of Nigeria, Montgomery attempts to show how African belief systems resonate throughout the diaspora, influencing diasporic faith systems and, subsequently, diasporic literature. Her Ifa reading of Ansa’s *Baby of the Family* thus offers a way of interpreting the “spirit” in the novel as an expression of a lesser-known aesthetic of diasporic blackness.

The final essay in this section, John Valery White’s “Just ’Cause (or Just Cause): On August Wilson’s Case for a Black Theater” (chapter 5), examines black aesthetics as ideology, particularly as black aesthetics relate to the politics Wilson expresses in “The Ground” speech. White critiques both Wilson’s speech and the Wilson/Brustein debate for both men’s attempts to define “authentic blackness,” a futile pursuit, White argues, which “impoverishes the critical debate over the future of American theater and the role of black theater in that future.” He insightfully points out that Wilson, instead of making the simple, though all-important point that there could be no American theater without blackness, is trapped in the rhetoric and politics of Black Nationalists’ notions, which demand that he fight for the existence of something that already and simply is and must be. That Wilson chooses not to escape these politics, White argues, may very well slow the progression and enhancement of black theater more so than advance it since these politics distort the real issue—the need for more funding for continued and new black theater development. Ultimately, White contends that Wilson might have been more effective in his critique of the state of funding of black theater if he had simply said black theater should be funded more responsibly “just ’cause” doing so advances such a “just cause.”

Part II of the collection opens with Harry Elam, Jr.’s “‘Keeping it Real’: August Wilson, Hybridity, and Hip Hop” (chapter 6), which connects two seemingly disparate black art forms—rap and theater—and shows their relationship by pointing out that like hip-hop culture, which often demands its musical artists “keep it real” or “stay true” to the culture out of which the music was birthed, Wilson’s politics demand that African American playwrights be true to African American culture and that they speak to the black experience especially if not exclusively. Elam contends that “analyzing the politics of rap in relation to Wilson’s “The Ground” speech on and through the politics of rap produces a revealing reading of the power of visibility and the place of history, of cultural production as a site of resistance, of the politics of representation, of the seductive authority of commercialism, and of both the oppositional possibilities and limitations of “keeping it real.” In short, Elam’s essay explores the problematics and the potential of the politics of representation and the politics of realness by which both hip-hop culture and Wilson claim to be motivated.

In “Giving Voice and Vent to African American Culture: August Wilson’s Black Aesthetics and Katherine Dunham’s Fight for Cultural Ownership in
Mambo” (chapter 7), Dorothea Fisher-Hornung highlights the timelessness of Wilson’s comments on the need of African Americans to create a means of protecting their cultural property and of declaring cultural ownership of their creations as she details Katherine Dunham’s struggle for cultural ownership of the artistry (the film’s dance choreography especially) she created for the 1954 film project Mambo. Fischer-Hornung likens Dunham, who was a dancer, choreographer, instructor, dance theorist, and anthropologist, to Wilson’s Ma Rainey who, like Dunham, actively fights against having her voice and style co-opted by white culture.

Closing this section is Sybil J. Roberts essay (chapter 8) which offers a playwright and scholar’s comments on the meaningfulness and vibrancy of theater activism as she experienced it while developing and producing the Mumia project—A Liberating Prayer: A Lovesong for Mumia—at Howard University. Noting that she drew from a rich tradition of black theater activism and aesthetics, including the ideologies of Barbara Ann Teer, Ntozake Shange, Abena Brown, and Robbie McCauley, to create A Liberating Prayer (which is included in the appendix), Roberts offers an articulation of her aesthetic and the aesthetic of others from the perspective of a theater practitioner who creates interdisciplinary performance rituals that address international issues of justice, peace, and sustainable “lifeways” by removing theater from the confines of the stage and its conventions to the street platforms of protest rallies and the like.

Each of the essays in part III of the collection offers new readings of Wilson’s plays, focusing especially on aesthetic nuances of his texts. First is Reggie Young’s “Phantom Limbs Dancing Juba Rites in August Wilson’s Joe Turner’s Come and Gone and The Piano Lesson,” which examines Wilson’s use of a black aesthetic—spiritual realism—in these two plays. Young’s contention is that attempts to explain the surreal elements of Joe Turner and Piano Lesson as magical realism are, more often than not, misinformed. Instead, spiritual realism, as a distinct mode of black expression, he argues, is a much more effective way of reading such texts, particularly Wilson’s, because they are “rooted in the culture of juba, ring-shouts, spirituals, and the blues, and share a cultural connection to Africa and not Latin America or Western Europe, except in incidental ways.” Thus, he reads Joe Turner and Piano Lesson through the lens of spiritual realism as a New World African aesthetic that seeks to use rituals to offer characters redemption from the fragmentation they experience after being enslaved and exposed to Western religions.

Next is Tara T. Green’s “Speaking of Voice and August Wilson’s Women” (chapter 9), which argues that though women tend to have limited speaking presences in Wilson’s overall dramatic canon, Ma Rainey from Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, Rose from Fences, and Risa from Two Trains Running are exemplary examples of the need for cultural ownership and voice that Wilson argues for in “The Ground on Which I Stand.” Thus, it is his female characters who represent Wilson’s perception and conception of art as an expression of African American culture, which struggles to be acknowledged and to be heard in a world dominated and controlled by a more powerful other.
Ma, Green argues, is very aware of the power her voice affords her and is empowered because of it. And though Rose does not come into her own voice until the end of *Fences*, Green astutely notes that she successfully injects her voice in the front yard rituals, reminiscent of Zora Neale Hurston’s manly porch-talk, and, ultimately, comes to realize that her *self* is intimately linked to her voice. And Risa’s lack of voice in *Two Trains Running* demonstrates the significance of African American self-definition and freedom and control of voice to success and to survival.

The last essay in this section, C. Patrick Tyndall’s “Using Black Rage to Elucidate African and African-American Identity in August Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*” (chapter 10), attempts to connect Wilson’s politics with his art. In “The Ground” speech, Wilson calls for federal support of black art and theater to improve the black community in general. *Joe Turner*, Tyndall argues, is an example of how theater can be used to improve the community since the play functions as a healing tool both for its characters and for the community. Thus, Tyndall’s reading of the play explores Wilson’s use of black rage to re-create African American identity that has been complicated by white oppression.

Finally, in part IV, we have included two previously unpublished interviews that focus especially on Wilson’s politics and his idea of black aesthetics. First is Yolanda Williams Page’s interview with Charles Dutton (chapter 11), which reveals Dutton’s thoughts on working with Wilson as a major character in three of Wilson’s most successful plays—*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and *The Piano Lesson*. Dutton also shares with Williams Page his thoughts about Wilson’s politics and his call for the continued development of black theater as an entity distinct from mainstream American theater and as one that acknowledges the value, worth, and artistry of African American cultural creations. Second is my and my coeditor’s interview with Wilson (chapter 12) where he talks candidly about the speech and its aftermath. He also comments on his idea of black aesthetics and on the future of black theater.

We are especially pleased to have included in the appendix Roberts’s *A Liberating Prayer: A Lovesong for Mumia*, which makes its published debut here but which was first produced in 2001 at Howard University in Washington, DC. Though we had no intention of making this collection an anthology, it was our intention to reveal the meaningfulness of black theater and its potential, as Wilson notes, to “disseminate ideas, [. . . to] educate the miseducated, because it is art—and all art reaches across that divide that makes order out of chaos, and embraces the truth that overwhelms with its presence, and connects man to something larger than himself and his imagination.”12 So when Roberts offered us her comments on the meaningfulness and vibrancy of theater activism as she experienced it while developing and producing the Mumia project at Howard, it only seemed fitting that we should include the play as an appendix to the essay so that the power of black theater and its impact on those who experience it personally could be, at the very least, made known and available to all.
As we initially conceived this project, my coeditor and I sought to publish essays that aggressively investigated the wide variety of issues Wilson raised in “The Ground” speech. We successfully resisted all urges to include essays that dealt only with Wilson’s plays or that sought to uphold his ideas as expressed in the speech. Instead, we are confident that we have provided a range of ideas and interpretations, all of which challenge scholars to reconsider black arts’ issues regarding theory, aesthetics, and ideology and cultural ownership and cultural production. Accordingly, it is our hope that, as readers, you find that this collection both makes a meaningful contribution to the growing body of criticism that examines August Wilson’s plays and his politics and that it offers new ways to think and to talk about black arts and black aesthetics.

Notes
2. In the interview with Wilson appended in this collection, he admits that there were no significant gains made from the speech, excepting the birth of the African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA). But in terms of securing funding for black theaters, the speech had little impact. The one black LORT theater that was open has since, in fact, closed.
5. Wilson, Ground, p. 73.
6. Ibid., p. 73.
7. Ibid., p. 16.
8. Ibid., p. 16.
9. Ibid., p. 72.
11. Wilson, Ground, p. 72.
12. Ibid., p. 74.
I

Black Aesthetics as Theory, Art, and Ideology
In the fall of 1996, following the June 1996 delivery of playwright August Wilson’s now famous speech “The Ground on Which I Stand” at the eleventh biennial Theatre Communications Group (TCG) National Conference at Princeton University, the news publication of the Black Theatre Network organization, BTNews, began a series of reports and articles designed to investigate and stir discussion on the issues presented in Wilson’s speech and the resulting effects of his message. The question presented or posed in the title of the initial BTNews article asked: “Thirty Years After the ‘Revolutionary’ 60s, Is There Still a Need to Justify Black Theatre?” The introduction to this article went on to state: “It is still necessary to educate the general public about black art’s unique spiritual nature. How do we hope to achieve this?” One of the aims of this present essay is to address the question by illustrating a history of theoretical development that predates the 1960s revolutionary era.

One way of achieving this goal is to take a close look at patterns of development in the theoretical and philosophical history of black theater in the United States. African American theater, or black theater in the United States, is a unique American sociocultural phenomenon that has served both public and private functions within the larger American society; an institution born of historical conflict and constantly propelled by a continuous quest for spiritual purpose and self-definition. By mapping a chronological history of theoretical writings concerning African American theater through the end of the twentieth century it is possible to see a clearly evolved history of social ideas and philosophical connections to spiritual awareness, spiritual sensibility, and spiritual purpose inherent within the institution of black theater in the United States. Theoretical analysis of this particular institution reveals five basic aspects or fundamentals of African American dramatic theory.
philosophy. These aspects are protest, revolt, assertion, music, and spirituality. These five aspects may be seen as essential elements, fundamentals, and/or aesthetic principles. A list of seven periods or developmental eras is also definable. They are: the Plantation or Slave era, the American Minstrel era, the New Negro Renaissance era, the Assimilationist era, the Black Revolutionary era, the Afrocentric era, and a currently evolving New Age Post-Revolutionary Movement.

This essay briefly explains the major precepts of each of these periods, giving special focus to the New Negro Renaissance era, The Black Revolutionary era, and the New Age Post-Revolutionary Movement; all the while illustrating a connective thread of insightful potential and developmental awareness—from the philosophical founding of an African American theater aesthetic in the United States by W.E.B. DuBois at the beginning of the twentieth century, to the revolutionary charge and challenge of Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) in the 1960s, to the contemporary dramatist and theorist August Wilson.

A major point to be addressed here is how Wilson’s 1996 speech rearticulates the theories of DuBois, Baraka, and others. Wilson’s “The Ground on Which I Stand” makes many salient points in direct relation to both DuBois and Baraka, as well as a full historical array of African American dramatic theorists, essayists, and philosophers. This present essay argues that Wilson’s 1996 speech helps to define him as a leading figure in a New Age Post-Revolutionary developmental epoch for African American theater at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Wilson’s remarks in “The Ground on Which I Stand” reinforce much of the past while inciting and inspiring new ways of thinking and illuminating new frontiers to be pioneered. The continuous through-line that connects all things past and present is a constant focus on potential and spiritual awareness, or “blood memory.” This survey of African American dramatic theory also responds to the question: “How do we hope to educate the general public about black art’s unique spiritual nature?” The answer lies in the acknowledgment and exposure of information regarding the historical development of black theater in the United States. This historical overview of the development of African American dramatic theory concludes with specific comparative insights between Wilson’s 1996 speech with DuBois’s 1926 speech and Baraka’s 1964–66 essay, illustrating the “hand-to-hand” developmental heritage of black art and Wilson’s role in that struggle.

We begin with the premise that African American theater emerged without a written philosophical doctrine as far back as the Middle Passage, when slaves were forced to dance and to drum on the decks of slave ships. Slaves were forced to continue these practices on southern plantations. Thus, the first period, epoch, or era of recognizable African American theatrical development is the Plantation or Slave period, where Africans essentially provided the stimulus and motifs for what would become America’s first original and indigenous theatrical form. Through careful reading of this unique phenomenon of American slavery it may be understood that the “entertainments” and
coded performances by slaves were actually disguised versions of African ritual acts infused with spiritual meaning and new purpose.

The appropriation of these slave acts by whites led to the second period of African American theatrical development. This was the American Minstrel era, which had a profound psycho-sociological impact on the entire American nation: white, black, and the shades in-between. The minstrel tradition was the institutional frame that produced and promoted negative images and stereotypes of African Americans through what cultural studies theorist John Fiske calls *Axis of Division*, whereby the dominant social class attempts to “naturalize” meanings that serve their interests into the “common sense” of the larger society. These stereotypes have lingered in the national consciousness of the United States for more years than can now be accurately counted.

The minstrel tradition itself is one of the greatest paradoxes in American history for several reasons. Chief among those reasons is the fact that it provided the first opportunity for blacks to take jobs legally on the legitimate stage. But following emancipation, black men took the stage in guises of white men who had imitated black slaves in low comic forms, thereby, reinforcing long-standing stereotypes of black clowns, buffoons, sambos, and coons. Thus, the entree of true African Americans onto American theater stages also initiated an immediate and warranted need to protest against a prevailing form and to assert different modes of presentation and new images of themselves as human beings deserving of serious respect and acknowledgment of their artistic talents.

The need to assert a “new Negro” image brought on the third distinctive era of African American theater. This was the New Negro Renaissance, or the Harlem Renaissance as it was also known. This period began ca. 1917 and spanned the decade of the 1920s. It is quite literally the philosophical and theoretical founding era for African American theater aesthetics. This intellectual movement was led by DuBois, who wrote prolifically about the Negro’s potential for serious theatrical artistry, both as performers and subjects worthy of serious dramatic treatment.

DuBois became the editor of *Crisis*, an important news journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The *Crisis* sponsored literary contests to stimulate the writing of plays by Negroes on themes of African American life. During this time an ideological concern for plays of social protest and the assertion of a new identity of elevated style and intellectual recognition fueled the artistic energies of a new generation of post-emancipation African Americans. DuBois was aided in his endeavor by other notable theoretical writers. Three such dramatic theorists include Alain Locke, editor of the major cultural and literary collection of this era titled *The New Negro*; Montgomery Gregory, critic, scholar, and teacher at the Negro theater training institution at Howard University; and Jessie Fauset, essayist, critic, and literary editor for *Crisis*.

During the New Negro era, there was widespread recognition of African American creative artists of all types: painters, sculptors, concert performers, and writers of literature, drama, literary criticism, essays, and manifestoes on
dramatic theory. The essays and manifestoes published during this time on Negro dramatic and theatrical achievements and potentials were the begin-nings of a formal written tradition of African American creative aesthetics. They have a particular focus in the realization of the need for African American artists to define and assert themselves by their own standards and in their own words. One principal task was to protest and revolt against a constructed image of Negro character and persona as established by a white hegemonic theatrical structure and to assert a “New Negro” image of creative beings with spiritual depth and prophetic potential. The New Negro Renaissance era was then, among other things, the beginning of African America’s intellectual search for self-expressive identity in the arts and humanities.

While “Negro folk life” was addressed primarily by white American playwrights throughout the 1920s, the focus on Negro social experience was led by DuBois. As early as the spring of 1903, the tone and dilemma of attempts by African Americans to project their own images in a universe that had been hostile toward such an endeavor was established when DuBois published *The Souls of Black Folk*. In this important first step toward a theoretical foundation and focus for self-expressive Negro stage image, DuBois proclaimed:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is sort of seventh son [sic], born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The anguish that DuBois expressed in this early work is surpassed by the acknowledgment of a special duality inherent in the very idea of the African as American. This duality combines elements of ancient African notions of intuitive power and spiritual destiny with “new world” ideas of progressive materialism in the dialectical manifestation of the African as an American, or African American. These elements would later become the basis of Kuntu and Nommo aesthetics, which concern cosmic spiritual connection to an African ancestral past and the power of the spoken word as often manifested in passionate vocal expressions associated with black oral traditions. Kuntu and Nommo are concepts that are discussed later with regard to Afrocentric philosophy.

DuBois’s 1903 concept of the dual nature of the African American makes it possible to view the complexities of the world, and especially the United States, through unique eyes. With this dual vision, the curse of material degradation is overshadowed by a clairvoyant gift for “second-sight” or intuition. In this view, the physical and psychological oppressiveness of an American hegemony is eclipsed by the African’s “dogged strength” and will to survive. The Americanization of the African motivates a new “creolized”
or “gestalt” spirit that aspires not merely to survive, but to live freely in the pursuit of happiness and beauty. The later development of these initial ideas would signal inherent pluralism and multicultural aspects within each striving African American spirit.

According to DuBois, living within the dual consciousness of an African American, or a “Black-figure on a White-ground,” does not totally reject all other ideas, but allows for the enrichment of those ideas with the insightful spirit of subconscious understanding. The challenge of DuBois’s statements is to expose such a potential that dwells within the dual spirit of Africans as Americans: to acknowledge the complex realities of being black in the United States and to assert the positive potentials of such a reality.

The high point of the search for a defining aesthetic aphorism toward the development of an African American theater is DuBois’s “Criteria of Negro Art,” an address given at the June 1926 Chicago NAACP third National Conference, in which DuBois announced his view that “all art is propaganda.” One finds that this adage referred principally to DuBois’s deeply held belief in the ethical and political responsibility of art and literature as a developmental tool for the Negro race. What DuBois presents in this address is essentially a manifesto of Negro/black/African American art and theater for all times. It can arguably be called “DuBois’s Poetics.” It is primarily concerned with the aesthetics or concepts of beauty as related to a Negro/black/African American worldview. Yet it is profoundly pragmatic as both a foundation for the development of such an artistic view and a sustaining guide for future growth and development.

DuBois suggested that the potential of Negro art would be to express the beauty of an African American cosmic spirituality. He associated truth with beauty and called for the masses to trust the beauty of spiritual truth to sustain a forward movement and reign justice in American society. He understood that arts, and especially the theater, were a device by which white America had constructed an image of the Negro to its liking and purpose. In “Criteria of Negro Art,” DuBois proposed a reversal of image and ideology through the urging of the (re)construction of Negro image from within the race. He outlined a procedure for this purpose in the following statement:

[…] it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, and we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before [… . . .] First of all, he has used the Truth […] Again artists have used Goodness—goodness in all its aspects of justice, honor and right.14

DuBois pointed out that the artistic means that had been used as a propaganda device against a race, primarily in the American Minstrel era, should now be used to uplift that same race. This was his urging. His 1926 speech gave to black American artists of all kinds a ground on which to stand and a light to illuminate their creative spirits. His manifesto remains a statement of profound aestheticism that provides four important points about the needs and purpose of Negro art: (1) An understandable devotion to the pursuit of
the beautiful and sensitivity to artistic beauty and refined taste. (2) A doctrine that beauty is the basic principle from which all other principles, especially moral ones, are derived. (3) The belief that art and artists have no obligation other than to strive for beauty. (4) An understanding or acceptance of a philosophy that beauty of the spirit is the means to truth and righteousness and the foundation for just living.

This declaration represented a more fully realized development of DuBois’s earlier ideas as presented in his 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk*. His perspectives grew in relation to the theatrical presentations of Negro life he witnessed between 1903 and 1926. His “Criteria” acknowledged both what had been done and what was left to be done toward the full realization of his vision to utilize the arts as a means of uplifting the Negro race. The impact of this historical formation and foundation for African American dramatic theory would be rearticulated in the resounding radical voices that would emerge during the 1960s and early 1970s.

Also in 1926, DuBois called for a new movement that began in Harlem and established four fundamental principles for African American theater companies in cities with large Negro populations such as New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and elsewhere. His intent was to inspire the creation of “Little Negro Theatre Groups” throughout the country. These fundamentals were a means to establishing a unified purpose for such an endeavor. The four fundamentals are still held as hallmarks of dramaturgical criteria for “serious” African American theater. The rules dictate that in order to qualify as “true” or “serious” the philosophies behind Negro American theaters and dramas must be:

1. About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. By us. This is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. For us. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. Near us. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.

DuBois felt that adherence to these rules was the only way in which serious and authentic dramas of African American experience could be developed. Using the four fundamentals as required criteria, literary contests conducted by the *Crisis*, under the editorship of DuBois and the literary management of Jessie Fauset, mined a substantial number of serious plays about African American life for publication and performance. Throughout the era, prevailing theoretical themes attempted to focus Negro artistic aspirations on creating a new image of black life. Potential was seen as possible only if Negroes could tap into their inherent spiritual power and expose positive and realistic images of themselves in situations unplagued by the dominating influences of white society. But one example of the problematic associated with development of a Negro American theater was expressed in a 1927 unsigned article, “On the Need for Better Plays,” in *Opportunity,*
published by the National Urban League under the editorship of Charles S. Johnson.

Like *Crisis*, *Opportunity* also operated and supported a literary contest as a means of developing the writing talents of the New Negro community. But in “On the Need for Better Plays” an alarming reality was revealed. It seemed that Negro writers of poetry, short stories, and novels of fiction, and essays all made great strides while taking advantage of the serious opportunities and prizes presented by *Crisis* and *Opportunity*. This was not the case for playwrights. The point made by this article was all the more serious because of the contrast presented: that plays of Negro life were being written by white writers while Negro playwrights were “limited for the most part to low comedy which has succeeded commercially, and to a few propagandistic efforts of a defensive character.” The article further charged that:

Negro writers have not, until very recently, sensed the possibilities of Negro drama. They have, excusably, used the drama as a field for the development of histrionic talent within the race and have led themselves off into palpably unreal portrayals of the general plays of the stock company repertoire. They have been too ashamed of the material of their own lives to give it artistic portrayal.\(^{17}\)

This statement indicates that most of the plays presented by Negro writers in this era appeared to be simple imitations of plays from the white commercial stage or throwbacks to the minstrel type characters and images of earlier times. The article’s writer strongly encourages new thoughts and interests in writing for the stage, because the stage might provide “…a medium for the forceful interpretation of Negro life itself, a service which the stage undoubtedly can perform with as great, if not greater, directness and power than either fiction or poetry.” Then, the author acknowledges a need and potential for “plays suitable for mixed cast, or plays that will offer aid toward softening the harsh points of racial contact.” The article ends with an identification of what it contended to be the major problem associated with the lack of plays by Negro playwrights; primarily, insufficient study of technique and a general lack of knowledge of play construction. Thus, the problem of training and training institutions for Negro theater artists was brought to the forefront as an important issue to be dealt with. However, the potential early solutions to this problem would also give rise to future needs for *revolt* and *assertion* in the waning decades of the twentieth century.

The New Negro Renaissance era was brought to a slow demise following the 1929 stock market crash. However, the 1930s saw the creation of the short-lived but very important Federal Theatre Project (FTP), which flourished between 1935 and 1939, and officially launched the fourth period of formal African American theater development: the Assimilationist era. The title given to this epoch must not overshadow the importance or productivity of the four years at its beginning, for it was during the FTP that African American theater artists received their first widespread opportunities for legitimate training in every aspect of theatrical arts.
Previous to the founding of the FTP the majority of Negro artists used their “natural talents” to gain notoriety and respect on the stage. What they were able to learn during the FTP would serve the development of African Americans in theater for many years to come following the congressional closing of the FTP national theater movement in 1939. The era is still considered assimilationist because it was dominated by Negro artist’s attempts to gain respect through traditional Eurocentric means. This meant Broadway for performers and the traditional forms of European-inspired “well made” plays for writers, utilizing the structures and concepts of “modern realism” as a stylistic dictate. Many black performers appeared in musical entertainments, mostly devised and suited for the tastes of white audiences, or in all-Negro cast versions of white Broadway fare. Attempts at success by black writers resulted in several one-act plays for community productions and a few notable, full-length, FTP-produced plays such as Theodore Ward’s *The Big White Fog*, J. Augustus Smith and Peter Morell’s *Turpentine*, Theodore Browne’s *Natural Man*, and even Langston Hughes’s Broadway hit *Mulatto*. These plays were notable and acclaimed because of their resemblance to European-derived dramatic forms. This period also saw the development of the first fully organized company of trained, resident professional black actors appropriately named the American Negro Theatre (A.N.T.). A.N.T. enjoyed success as a theater company in Harlem, Los Angeles, and on Broadway from 1940 to 1950. But even the A.N.T. is best remembered for its transfers of productions to Broadway stages of *On Striver’s Row*, *Anna Lucasta*, *Walk Hard*, and *Freight*. The Assimilationist era continued into the 1950s with Negroes in professional performance roles in Hollywood and on Broadway mostly as servants, laborers, and background characters. Playwrights such as Alice Childress, William Branch, Louis Peterson, and Charles Segree all had plays presented in New York’s commercial arenas. All their plays were written in the Eurocentric style of modern realism. But the greatest glory and recognition went to Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun*, which won critical acclaim and presented a spiritual preamble to the next major developmental moment. *A Raisin in the Sun* first appeared in 1958. Some white critics claimed that it was not really a Negro play at all but more about a Jewish or Irish family. Such comments were double-edged, praising the prowess of Hansberry’s use of Eurocentric-inspired dramatic form and structure while suggesting that the play may not have been “Black enough” for white expectations. The play presented a dialectical picture of a Negro family, the Younger family. It included a dominant Mother figure representing the “old Negro” ideology, an Americanized and materialistic adult son, and the most radical of all the characters represented by the female college student daughter with new ideas concerning the place of women in society and the place of things African in the consciousness of young Negros. Hansberry’s play had underlying revolutionary tones that were not clearly apparent to the white public, who saw aspects of themselves and their own aspirations in quest of an “American dream.” These revolutionary preambles were not fully
apparent to the Negro public either, who would soon understand what was being alluded to in this play about modern Negroes. But *A Raisin in the Sun* may now be viewed as a bridge between the double-consciousness associated with black writers in the Assimilationist era and a burgeoning Civil Rights/Black Power/Black Revolutionary Movement that was to flourish fully in the 1960s.

The fifth period of development, the *Black Power/Black Arts & Aesthetics/Black Revolutionary era* beginning in the mid-1960s, remains possibly the most prolific period of black theater development to date. During this era the ideology of black awareness, black nationalism, and black empowerment fostered a huge number of black playwrights and theater groups throughout the nation. Theorist and playwright Imamu Amiri Baraka, then known as LeRoi Jones, wrote an essay in 1964 titled, “In Search of the Revolutionary Theatre,” which became the major manifesto for this period. Baraka also wrote a number of plays and founded theater groups in Harlem and Newark. But it was his prescriptive theory on the nature of black theater as a revolutionary tool and weapon for positive propaganda and consciousness raising that recapitulated and reinforced the New Negro Renaissance ideology of DuBois in a radically political manner.

The concepts of revolution have certain similarities to the concepts of renaissance. Both concepts are concerned with the creation of a new order, with providing new approaches, and with establishing new criteria of aesthetics and operations. One major difference between the two concepts is the element of *revolt* that is inherent in revolutionary philosophy. Moreover, revolution is often associated with radicalism and extremism in its efforts to achieve newness. The primary distinction between the two concepts is seen clearest in the radical extremism of revolution, which is contrastable with renaissance aims of rebirth and revival more often associated with revival of classical or essentialist ideals. In this regard, defining an American epoch of the 1960s and early 1970s as the Revolutionary Black Theater era becomes complex. This era is often defined on the basis of its pervasive alliance with the most militant factions of the American Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. But too often the renaissance concepts and aims are overlooked, making it difficult to recognize this era as a developmental outgrowth of the black essentialist New Negro era.

The Revolutionary era brought back the ideas of *protest* and *assertion* introduced during the 1920s with radical power and purpose in the 1960s, redressed in the form of anger and *revolt*. Revolutionary Black Theater ideology also reintroduced *spirituality*, but it was a highly radical and reformed version of *spirituality*. Baraka’s aesthetic theory outlined new politically militant criteria for African American drama. In addition to the four fundamentals prescribed earlier by DuBois during the New Negro Renaissance, Baraka stated: “The Revolutionary Theater should force change, it should be change.” This change was to be on all levels but focused most directly on the socioeconomic status and conditions of black Americans. Through theatrical means, Baraka wanted to “EXPOSE” the racial ills of Western society.
and teach whites the ramifications of hatred and denial of what he called “the supremacy of the [black] Spirit.” His doctrine states:

This should be a theatre of World Spirit. Where the spirit can be shown to be the most competent force in the world. Force. Spirit. Feeling. The language will be anybody’s, but tightened by the poet’s backbone. And even the language must show what the facts are in this consciousness epic, what’s happening. We will talk about the world, and the preciseness with which we are able to summon the world, will be our art.22

In addressing the notion of the spirit, or the spiritual nature of African American people, Baraka was making a direct connection to DuBois and Locke who both saw potential in the depth of an esoteric metaphysical connection between the souls of black Americans and cosmic universal forces. This spiritual consciousness, Baraka suggests, is developed by listening to ancestral voices that speak to the soul or spirit in silent meditative moments. In those moments the world outside the spiritual connection can only see craziness, because they can only see life and the world on a material plain. They are denied the DuBoisian “second-sight” of the gifted black soul to illuminate the cosmic spiritual teachings.

Baraka was essentially calling for the same Kuntu (cosmic connection) focus on African American spirituality in the 1960s as the aesthetic theorist and philosophers of the New Negro Renaissance era had called for in the 1920s. In Baraka’s view, the loss of African Americans’ connection to intuitive spirit and power was due to years of indoctrination and victimization by whites. Baraka saw his theater as a theater of victims. Everyone involved in this theater was to see the world through the eyes of the victimized. His aim was to show African Americans and white Americans what had been created by white Western hegemonic domination of the world, so that the world might change. He wanted to show that the very existence of African Americans as descendants of slaves made them victims of an oppositional reality, his way of denoting double-consciousness. For Baraka and a large number of black Americans in this era, social victimization was the true reality of Western hegemony. Baraka wanted to alter the white-ground reality, and to expose that reality from the perspective of the oppressed and abused as a means toward fulfilling a moral obligation to the spiritual purpose of African American existence.

Baraka expressed an expectation and awareness of the effects of his radical theory when he wrote: “[white] Americans will hate the revolutionary theatre because it will be out to destroy them and whatever they believe is real.”23 The revolutionary theater saw whites and their ancestors as victimizers. The white world, as represented by Western society, was seen as evil, corrupt, and totally consumed by materialistic desires. The revolutionary theater accused and attacked Western society for its preoccupation with the material aspects of existence and its rejection of spiritual (not to be confused with religious) virtue. Again in the words of Baraka: “The Revolutionary Theatre
must hate them for hating. For presuming with their technology to deny the supremacy of the Spirit.” But it must be remembered that the major catalyst for this revolutionary ideology was the pursuit of liberty and the quest for social and racial equality. With that vision at the forefront, the plays presented in this theater were calls to action. While the primary goal may have been a call to political action, the ultimate goal was to move black Americans into a philosophy of positive personal action. Baraka suggested that plays be used as tactical weapons in the psychological war against white hegemony, as “bullets to be used against the enemy.”

The practicality of this philosophy is expressed in the following segment from Baraka’s manifesto:

> The Revolutionary Theatre must take dreams and give them a reality. It must isolate the ritual and historical cycles of reality. But it must be food for all these who need food, and daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind. But it is a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on.

While this statement speaks about the idealistic notions of a theater that presents black dreams and visions of a better life, it also presents two compelling aspects: (1) the revolutionary theater as a theater of reality; and (2) the revolutionary theater as a theater of assault.

Dramatist and theorist Ed Bullins joined Baraka as another important critical voice of the Revolutionary Black Theater era. In 1966, Bullins published an essay that defined his approach to writing for the revolutionary theater titled “Theatre of Reality.” In this essay, Bullins follows Baraka’s precepts and rejects white theatrical tradition and dramaturgy in radical fashion with the statement: “Aristotle and his aesthetic dogmas are not of this time and never had been meant for the black artist anyway.” Bullins explained that method and technique were not the immediate goals of the Revolutionary Movement. The exploration and creation of new characters, new themes, and new definitions were far more important. He was concerned with exposing the negative realities of humanity by presenting honest, rather than perfectly structured, African American characters and themes. In order to dramatize the radical psychological journey being experienced by black Americans, Bullins thought it was necessary to utilize a variety of theatrical styles and methods. He wrote:

> It is not a call for a return to realism or naturalism that this theater calls for; it is the exposure of illusion through exploding myths and lies that are disguised as reality and truths. These myths, and especially those concerning the black man, clutter the heart of his existence, his humanity.

The theatrical reality that Bullins sought was the assertion of a black sense of reality, which is counter and oppositional to what white society may see as truth. This reality is bent on exposing the ills of such a society, especially as
it relates to that society’s degradation of blacks. The aim of Bullins’s “Theatre of Reality” was to create characters with “metaphysical yearnings” and use them as propaganda in the war of mind and spirit. He would later identify his focus on African American characters as part of what he called “Black dialectics” with two branches: “dialectic of change,” which he associated with protest and the prescriptive purpose of black revolutionary writing, and “dialectic of experience,” which was the experience of “being” and expressing the realities of the African American “self” and worldview.30

The overall Black Power Movement of the 1960s included protests of every kind, from “sit-ins” and marches, to boycotts and speeches, to all-out riots. Protest art and literature became a part of this overall Movement in the form of a total black arts agenda. The general Black Arts Movement of this era included the aesthetics of African American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, novelists, and visual artists. It was essentially a new version of the New Negro Renaissance, now renamed the New Black Renaissance. The distinction between this new era and the criteria established during the 1920s involved the use of the term “radical.” The Revolutionary Black Theater era gained prominent focus in this regard because it was such a visible and pervasive part of the larger Arts and Power Movements. An estimated 400 plays were produced by nearly 200 playwrights. The overwhelming majority of these plays were unashamedly propaganda for the larger cause of the Black Arts–Black Power alliance. This was the kind of propaganda that DuBois would have been be proud of.

Like the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement sought to change artistic perspectives by use of drastic measures. Poet and essayist Larry Neal, in a 1968 essay for the umbrella Black Arts Movement titled “The Black Arts Movement,”31 explained that it was a concept which proposed “a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic” including “a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology.” It attempted to create an artistic expression that spoke “directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America,” rather than trying to assimilate African Americans into white society. Neal wrote:

Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept […] radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community […] The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors? … In a context of world upheaval, ethics and aesthetics must interact positively and be consistent with the demands for a more spiritual world. Consequently, the Black Arts Movement is an ethical movement. Ethical, that is, from the viewpoint of the oppressed.32

Here, Neal makes clear the very important point concerning black revolutionary aesthetics—that artists must accept the notion of art in service to a
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communal cause and effort. This was a clear doctrine of artistic power of purpose. He leaves no doubt that revolutionary art owes allegiance to an ethical and spiritual use of the cosmic artistic gifts for enlightenment and empowerment of the oppressed and previously marginalized voices of American culture.

The essays of Baraka, Bullins, and Neal helped to clearly define a theoretical era. In addition, other dramatists of the period including Ron Milner in “Black Theater-Go Home!,” Hoyt Fuller in “Toward a Black Aesthetic,” and the literary anthology of the Movement edited by Addison Gayle, Jr. titled The Black Aesthetic, provided important theoretical blueprints that energized and focused the revolutionary Movement. These ideas continue to hold ground in present-day black consciousness.

By the mid-1970s the ideology of Black Nationalism that surfaced during the 1960s gave rise to philosophies of Afrocentrism, the sense of a psychological and philosophical return to Africa and things African. Thus, a sixth era evolved, ranging from the mid-1970s through the end of the 1980s, and is named the Revolutionary Afrocentric era. It retains revolutionary ideology while it is marked by a return to African consciousness in the form of ritual-based aesthetics. It is personified in African American theater by the concepts of “Kuntu,” cosmic connection, and “Nommo,” power of the voiced or spoken word. These concepts were explained primarily in the writings of dramatist and scholar Paul Carter Harrison.

In 1974 Harrison edited an anthology of plays that expressed a fully Afrocentric consciousness. It was called Kuntu Drama: Plays of the African Continuum. The plays and the writings that preceded them presented, or resurrected, African philosophical concepts as a basis for African American theater and drama. The preface to this work was written by Oliver Jackson, who defined Kuntu drama as:

[...] drama that has, as its ultimate purpose, to reveal and invoke the reality of the particular mode that it has ritualized. This theater style depends on power and power invocation. It is magical in that it attempts to produce modification in behavior through the combined use of word power, dance power, and music power. It is sacred theater in the sense that it seeks to fulfill a spiritual revelation.

In the realm of the Revolutionary Afrocentric era, the play or theater piece is a “ritualized context of reality” with positive spiritual purpose. For black people in the United States, who live perpetually under and within the invisible oppressive strain of American hegemonic domination, Kuntu drama has potential to be both prophetic and pragmatic. It includes the audience in the ritual as part of a community and the invocation of the spirits who help bring forth the enlightened insights of the ritual or play and releases beneficent power to the participants, which includes both the audience and the players. Theater in this sense takes on many of the same characteristics of the black church service. Kuntu drama is essentially more ritual than drama. But it