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Howard Theater, Washington, DC July 2013
(Photo by Blair A. Ruble)

Introduction

City and Stage

It's a mass of irony
For all the world to see.
It's the nation's capital,
It's Washington, DC.
—Gil Scott-Heron, 1982¹

Cities appear, at times, as faces in a crowd. From a distance, they often look the same. Individual characteristics present themselves on closer inspection. Some cities—like some faces—are so striking that they immediately stand out as beautiful, full of life, or troubled. Other cities reveal their true character with time. Washington is one such city.

Since its founding, three unsettled tensions have beleaguered Washington with little sign of resolution: those between (1) national capital and hometown; (2) north and south; and (3) Black and White. Washington shares the first strains with capital cities around the world. Much of the local culture has been shaped by the ebb and flow of northern and southern influences that are evident in other “border” cities such as Baltimore, Louisville, and Saint Louis, to name a few. Every American urban community with a significant multiracial population daily confronts challenges about the question of race. In many ways, the Washington approached through these lenses remains one more face among the urban crowd. Its singularity lies elsewhere.

Washington, uniquely among American cities, has remained disenfranchised since its founding as a federal enclave. Somewhat independent municipal governance existed in Georgetown, Alexandria (while it was still in the District of Columbia), and Washington City before the Civil War. Congress nonetheless

wielded considerable power over local officials even then. With the abolition of home rule in 1874, the city entered just under a century of direct subjugation to Congress. Washington residents had no political outlet for grievance during this period, and frequently turned to cultural expression as a surrogate. The result has been a local urban culture that retains a bent towards resistance.

In the absence of an overarching political life, the very meaning of “local” became contested. Residents and communities seeking to establish their presence in the city—and, because of its capital status, the nation—confronted prohibitions against the sort of political action evident elsewhere throughout the country. For much of the twentieth century, the local life of the theater offered an alternative path to recognition as a step toward acceptance.

Energetic theater leaders representing various communities pursued social and artistic acceptance by proclaiming presence from Washington stages. This book recounts four such efforts: those of African American cognoscente to establish a national Negro theater; those of Roman Catholic clerics to nurture a theater for the nation reflecting their values; those of theater enthusiasts to demonstrate the power of regional theater in an American stage community preoccupied with Manhattan; and, those of community activists to assert the legitimacy of the disenfranchised to establish their own civic presence.

Together, these efforts fostered a theater scene by century’s end that would emerge as the second most attended in the country behind only New York. This industry, in turn, propelled an exploding cultural community that transformed a once sleepy, Southern, provincial town into a vibrant international arts center.

Proclaiming Racial Presence

In 1916, the writer Edward Christopher Williams and the activist playwright Carrie Clifford organized a “drama committee” within the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).² The committee’s members included Williams and Clifford, Anna Julia Cooper, together with Howard University professors Alain Leroy Locke, Ernest E. Just, and T. Montgomery Gregory.³ Beyond promoting theater, the commit-

tee set about countering the impact of D. W. Griffith's scurrilous glorification of the Ku Klux Klan in the film *The Birth of a Nation*.⁴ In doing so, they wanted to transform theater from the mask of burnt-cork Blackface to a mirror reflecting the realities of African American community life.

Several prominent Washingtonians participated in the founding of the NAACP in 1909 and, by 1913, in establishing a semiautonomous District of Columbia chapter.⁵ Intense struggles over control of the Washington-based chapter broke out almost immediately.⁶ With easy access to the federal government and to the city's prosperous African American community, the Washington NAACP chapter represented a potential alternative power base to the national NAACP headquarters in New York. Struggles over control of the DC chapter would continue until a bitter 1942 court battle definitively resolved the chapter's status as subordinate to the national organization.

This conflict for control of the NAACP in Washington was more than just a struggle over internal funds, rights, and privileges. The organization was caught up in skirmishes touched off by a rising professional class within the city's African American community as it sought to seize community leadership away from well-entrenched pastor-politicians. Ambassador Archibald Grimké took control of DC's NAACP chapter and built it into the largest and strongest of all the organization's local affiliates. Williams's and Clifford's drama committee was but one component of these larger struggles.

Archibald Grimké, former US consul in Santo Domingo, and his brother, the Reverend Francis Grimké of the prestigious Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, had long been intellectual and moral leaders of Washington's African American community. Born slaves in Charleston—and nephews of the famed abolitionists and suffragettes Sara and Angelina Grimké—Archibald and Francis fled slavery to fight with the Union Army. After the Civil War, they attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania before, respectively, entering Harvard Law School and Princeton Theological Seminary.

Archibald's daughter, Angelina Weld Grimké, attended DC public schools and taught English at Armstrong Technical High School and Dunbar High School. Her essays, short stories, and

poems would be included in such anthologies of the New Negro (Harlem) Renaissance as *The New Negro*, *Carolina Dusk*, and *Negro Poets and Their Poems*. Working closely with the DC NAACP chapter's Drama Committee, the young English teacher penned *Rachel*, which has come to be considered the first "propaganda" play to counter the pernicious impact of Griffith's film and other's racist films and plays.⁷

Rachel premiered under the Drama Committee's auspices at the Myrtilla Miner Normal School on March 3–6, 1916. Directed by Nathaniel Guy, the production, as its playbill noted, was a "race play in three acts" representing "the first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of tens of millions of colored citizens in this Free Republic."⁸

Grimké's script responded to the heightened racism of the era, and to the southern White barbarism underlying an accelerating rate of lynching. Her characters proclaim African American personhood and citizenship by focusing on African American domesticity and the damage inflicted on it by White mob violence.⁹ They use theater to proclaim their fundamental humanity—to stake their claim to Washington, and to the United States.

These efforts were not without controversy. Divisions over staging *Rachel* brought focus to what had been often inchoate differences in sensibility. Two distinct schools of thought emerged, driven by the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois and Locke, throughout the 1920s. Over time, their positions became reduced to differences between "propaganda," as advocated by DuBois; and "art," as promoted by Locke's approach to aesthetics.¹⁰ In the end, Du Bois and Locke agreed to disagree. As Henry D. Miller observes, "In both men's cases, the depth of their education and intellect alerted them to the fact that Negro culture could produce art that was beyond the precepts of the White middle class."¹¹

Their proponents and admirers continued their argument over what constituted Black theater—and who was in and who was out. Did one accept Du Bois's four principles of African American drama and theater as being "about us, by us, for us, and near us"—or not?¹² This disagreement animated African American—and Washington's—theater for the remainder of the twentieth century.¹³

Locke and Gregory eventually supported the Drama Committee's production of Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* with the expectation that the committee subsequently would support the folk dramas they favored. Locke resigned when the committee failed to back such productions.¹⁴ He and Gregory returned to campus with a dream of establishing a National Negro Theatre similar to the Irish National Theater, founded in 1904 by W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, George Moore, and Edward Martyn.¹⁵ This pair of Howard professors sought to create a theater that would allow for racial expression directly through the pens and performances of group members unimpeded, as in Dublin, by the interference of others.

Through these battles, Locke and Gregory discovered a common belief in the power of realistic portraiture of lower-class life, together with a style of storytelling, stage direction, and set and costume design that was coming to define modernist drama.¹⁶ This mutual preference animated Gregory's attempts to transmute Howard University's drama club into the more ambitious Howard Players as a step toward creating a National Negro Theatre based on the Irish model. That evolution forms the core of this volume's first chapter.

Acrimony was guaranteed when Williams, Clifford, Cooper, Locke, Gregory, and Just gathered in 1916 as the NAACP Drama Committee to discuss whether to present Angelina Weld Grimké's new play *Rachel*. Each of the participants embraced differing calculations of the appropriate balance between education, aesthetics, and commerce for constituting the value of theater. These cleavages defined the contours of African American theater more generally throughout the century. The challenge of mediating between such seemingly divergent values continues.

Lost within the resulting tensions stands the deeper reality of shared distress over the condition of African American communities in the capital and the nation. The egos of many committee members trembled before no one. Their phenomenally successful subsequent careers reveal a firm belief in oneself held by all. Nonetheless, all shared the belief that theater could confront the American denial of full citizenship on the basis of skin color.

Proclaiming Confessional Presence

Father Gilbert V. Hartke, OP—like Gregory and Locke a decade and a half previously—sought to transform the American theater by bringing a new sensibility to mainstream productions.¹⁷ Similarly to their colleagues at Howard, Father Hartke and the Catholic University faculty eventually defined their mission as injecting a distinctive spiritual energy into a universal theater.

As a young priest in the Dominican order, Hartke became a prime mover within the movement to create a “National Catholic Theater.” He and his colleagues drew on the model of the Irish National Theater to stake their claim to Washington’s and the American stage, as had Gregory and Locke before.

Catholic theater in America before World War I remained primarily associated with the Irish traditions and performers that had accompanied the arrival of mass immigration from the Emerald Isle. This is hardly surprising, because traditional anti-Catholic sentiment prompted Catholics to organize their own separate community of institutions, hospitals, schools, settlement houses, orphanages, and every other kind of necessary social support structure. American Catholic culture was, in the words of the theater historian Matthew Donald Powell, a “ghetto” culture still in search of new ways to break into the American mainstream.¹⁸ The popularity of Irish comedy and musical theater helped to erode such restrictions. After the war, a new generation of lay and religious (i.e., those who were members of religious orders) Catholic theater lovers arose, intent on transcending the stereotypes that had dominated the American stage.

Building on networks from his Chicago youth, Hartke recruited Northwestern University speech professor Josephine Callan to his team, together with one of her prize students, another young Midwesterner, Walter Kerr. Long before Kerr became the Pulitzer Prize-winning theater critic for the *New York Herald-Tribune* and the *New York Times*, he taught, penned successful plays, and directed them on stage at Catholic University. Alan Schneider, a recent graduate of Cornell University’s graduate program in fine arts, also signed on. Schneider would go on to become the legendary director of plays by such midcentury masters as Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, and Joe Orton.

The original Hartke team stayed together from the late 1930s into the mid-1950s. They mounted productions of classics and experimental plays, as well as nearly two dozen original works (about a quarter of which were subsequently produced professionally).¹⁹ Nine department productions before 1950 went on to Broadway, including six original plays (five of which were penned by Kerr).²⁰ The department's students—such as Phillip Bosco, Pat Carroll, Henry Gibson, George Herman, Jean Kerr, John McGiver, Ed McMahon, Susan Sarandon, Frances Sternhagen, and Jon Voight—thrived, winning Tony Awards, Pulitzer Prizes, and other accolades throughout distinguished careers.²¹ The creative team's talent, energy, and quality of effort animated the program into the 1960s.²²

Father Hartke and his Catholic University colleagues vigorously opposed Jim Crow segregation in the city and its theaters. By the late 1940s, Actors' Equity and the Dramatists' Guild began picketing Washington productions. Helen Hayes, Oscar Hammerstein II, Cornelia Otis Skinner, and twenty other theater luminaries declared a boycott of both the National Theatre and George Washington University's Lisner Auditorium until they granted African American audiences equal access to their productions.²³ Rather than give in to such pressure, the National Theatre closed in 1948 and tried to make a go as a movie house. The theater remained dark after the collapse of its movie escapade, only to reopen in 1952 under new management as an integrated auditorium.²⁴

Catholic University, meanwhile, pursued a different path to proclaim its presence in the city and nation. Father Hartke joined civic efforts to build a municipal theater that would be open to all and lent his own voice to the growing chorus of protests against segregation. As so often is the case in Washington, what seemed focused around the city often proved to be not so local in execution. The drive to create a municipal theater eventually led to the establishment and construction of the national John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, on whose founding board Father Hartke sat. Father Hartke similarly integrated audiences at the nearby Olney Summer Theater in Maryland, which was becoming ever more strongly associated with Catholic University's drama program.

Father Hartke grew into a formidable presence in Washington—

Washingtonian Magazine named the priest as one of the city's most powerful men in 1981—and used his position to advance the place of the arts in the city. “The show-biz priest” remained a steadfast supporter of civil rights and actively fought to end Jim Crow segregation and racial discrimination in Washington until his death in 1986. Together with his students and colleagues, he expanded the American stage and screen while moving Washington toward a more inclusive cultural life.²⁵ They did so by proclaiming their values and their presence to stake their claims to the Washington stage.

Proclaiming Regional Presence

Zelda Diamond Fichandler was in her early twenties as the 1940s turned into the 1950s. She and her husband Tom joined up with her George Washington University graduate school drama professor Edward Mangum to launch a local theater company. None of the company's founding troika appear to have been motivated particularly by a social justice agenda. Instead, they wanted to bring theater to a city where virtually none existed, thereby proclaiming a presence as a national institution from the Washington stage.

The absence of a vibrant homegrown theater community in Washington was not as distinguishing as it might have seemed. As the playwright Arthur Miller wrote in 1955, “The American theater occupies five side streets, Forty-Fourth to Forty-Ninth, between Eighth Avenue and Broadway, with a few additional theaters to the north and south and across Broadway. In these thirty-two buildings, every new play in the United States starts life and ends it.”²⁶

Even if it might have been objectionable to some at the time, the claim that Broadway was the totality of American theater was a plausible point to argue in the 1950s. The Fichandlers helped ensure that such notion could no longer be entertained a handful of years later.

Professional theater was unlikely to take root in the city at a time when the boycott of the National Theatre and Lisner Auditorium over their Jim Crow policies showed no sign of abating. With the help of Father Hartke, the Fichandlers and Mangum succeeded in leasing the Hippodrome, an abandoned movie and burlesque

house on the edge of downtown.²⁷ The building's physical arrangement prevented the construction of a proscenium stage. Taken with Margo Jones's experiments in Dallas with theater-in-the-round, the new company built a central stage reminiscent of a boxing ring. Arena Stage was born.²⁸

Arena, from the very beginning, was committed to opening its stage and audience to all races. The company allowed White and African American patrons to sit together from its first performances. These arrangements produced none of the acrimony predicted by White defenders of segregation, and the company went on to extend efforts to integrate the Washington stage. Arena's quiet advocacy for interracial audiences and performances took on ever greater significance as the company became a permanent fixture on the Washington scene.²⁹

Arena's engagement with the city's racial politics both shaped and was shaped by profound postwar changes in Washington's demographic structure.³⁰ Pent-up consumer demand from the harsh years of the Great Depression and World War II combined with new highways and accessible housing to lure middle-class city dwellers to the suburbs around Washington, as was also happening in other metropolitan areas across the United States.³¹ Easing racially restrictive real estate practices enabled the African American middle class to move to neighborhoods where they previously had been unwelcome (including some of the very same areas of the city left behind by the suburbanizing White middle class). By 1957, Washington had become the first major US city with a majority African American population.³²

Arena was not alone among the White arts community in its concern about racial equity. The city's local theater increasingly engaged in disputes over what it meant to be an American in the 1960s and 1970s. Hazel and John Wentworth, for example, opened the Washington Theater Club during the 1950s in a cozy carriage house at 1632 O Street NW.³³ Zoning regulations impinged on the club's attempts to grow into a dramatic arts center and school. The enterprise eventually moved in 1970 to an abandoned church in the traditionally African American, working-class West End neighborhood (the present site of a Ritz-Carlton Hotel). Despite sustained popularity among Washington theatergoers, the club's ambiguous

legal status provided scant protection from the city's rapacious tax collectors. The company liquidated its assets in 1974 to cover back real estate taxes.³⁴

In her 1990 introductory essay to Arena Stage's fortieth-anniversary celebration of itself—*The Arena Adventure: The First Forty Years*—Zelda Fichandler observes that "the community ringed around the theater circles a community within the theater. The people without, as well as the people within, constitute the theater in its fullest sense." Embracing the community without, those outside the theater, led Zelda and her Arena Stage to engage Washington's vibrant and energetic African American community on the challenges of race.

Simultaneously, their success led them to imagine an American theater spread out across the nation. As they became leaders of an expanding regional theater movement during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the Fichandlers proclaimed a regional presence on an American stage unbound by Arthur Miller's thirty-two buildings in midtown Manhattan.

Proclaiming Community Presence

Gregory, Hartke, and the Fichandlers had countrywide agendas as they sought to establish national centers for African American, Catholic, and regional theater. Their ties to different communities within the city grew to be robust; their successes and failures held up mirrors to the city around them. Nevertheless, Washington as a place often provided context rather than impetus. What happened next was something quite different.

Washington—during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—was the center of racial resistance to a White-dominated status quo. Ranging from social protest and civil unrest to economic empowerment and political activism, race dominated every aspect of life in this city that had become majority Black just a few years before.³⁵ Activists, in response, promoted the concept of community for bringing attention down from abstraction to life on the streets.

All of Washington's worlds crashed violently on the evening of April 4, 1968, when radios throughout the city shared the news that the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot in Memphis.

Just over an hour later, the announcement came that King had died. Menacing calm turned to shock, which turned to hot anger in a matter of minutes. Soon the neighborhood around the intersection of U and 14th Streets NW was aflame in an outburst of violence. Civil order collapsed for the next three days, and it was only eventually restored after the city was occupied by more than 13,000 federal troops for a dozen days.³⁶

For weeks—even months—those who stayed in the neighborhood had to rely on churches and civic organizations for essentials because the stores that sold food and personal items were gone. “Riot corridors” along U Street, Fourteenth and Seventh Streets NW, and H Street NE remained undeveloped for the next quarter century—and longer.

The question of home rule proved to perhaps be the most painful wound left festering as the city tried to move ahead.³⁷ City residents had been allowed to vote in presidential elections since the early 1960s. They gained an elected school board in 1968. In 1971, residents secured the right to elect a nonvoting delegate to the US House of Representatives. However, such measures mattered little in light of the absence of local electoral control over the District’s government.

Against this backdrop, a search for new understandings of American race relations found expression in the arts. Washington emerged as an especially vibrant center within this quest as the potent Black Arts Movement took shape. The various streams swirling around the movement connected with disenfranchised Black communities and neighborhoods across the city. Many artistic endeavors—including those in theater—became deeply embedded in the search for local power.³⁸

At about this time, Topper Carew’s New Thing Art and Architecture Center in Adams Morgan sought to integrate the arts with inclusive urban planning.³⁹ A Boston native, he attended Howard University to study architecture, before earning undergraduate and graduate degrees from Yale. He became a civil rights worker in Mississippi and Maryland, and was one among many imaginative activists attracted to Washington’s rebellious Black culture. He later earned a PhD in communications from Union Graduate School and the DC think tank the Institute for Policy

Studies.⁴⁰ He established the New Thing in a pregentrified corner of Adams Morgan in 1966 to engage the era's "urban crisis."

Washington native Robert Hooks, the son of blue-collar workers living in the city's then-plebeian Foggy Bottom neighborhood, established the DC Black Repertory Theater (DCBRC) in the early-1970s. Hooks—who in 1967 had established New York's venerable Negro Ensemble Company in collaboration with Douglas Turner Ward—brought theater into this effervescent artistic mix.⁴¹ The company's senior creative staff included Artistic Director Motojicho (Vantile Whitfield), Vocal Director Bernice Reagon, and Choreographers Louis Johnson, Mike Malone, and Charles Augins. Malone and Johnson created numerous new works such as *Black Nativity*, a performance piece drawing on the work of Langston Hughes that has proven a lasting achievement.⁴² Augins enjoyed success in New York and London before heading the Dance Department at the DC Public School System's Duke Ellington School of the Arts. Reagon used the opportunity to found the successful vocal group Sweet Honey in the Rock.⁴³

The DCBRC's leadership had deep DC roots. Motojicho graduated from Dunbar High School and Howard University before heading to Hollywood. Reagon moved to the city after graduating from Spelman College in Atlanta to pursue a PhD at Howard. She would become a fixture at the Smithsonian Institution. Johnson captured the attention of his teachers in the DC Public Schools while growing up in the U Street NW neighborhood. Encouraged by his early mentors, he headed off to the School of American Ballet in New York City, where he studied with Jerome Robbins and George Balanchine. Malone, who had come to Washington to earn a degree in French at Georgetown University, had tap danced with Josephine Baker while studying at the Sorbonne. Augins grew up in Arlington, Virginia, and studied at DC's Jones-Hayward School of Dance.

Although DCBRC would close after only a handful of seasons, Hooks, Motojicho, Reagon, Johnson, Malone, and Augins continued to have phenomenally successful careers after the demise of the DCBRC in 1976. Hooks is perhaps best known today for his role in the 1960s television drama *NYPD*. Motojicho became a major funder of African American and regional performing arts and

eventually returned to Los Angeles, where he continued his film career. Reagon won a MacArthur Foundation Genius Award and became the mainstay of the much-lauded Sweet Honey in the Rock. Johnson enjoyed success as a choreographer working with numerous ballet companies, Broadway shows, and Metropolitan Opera productions, and he participated in the establishment of Howard University's Dance Department. He became an admired figure in the New York and American dance world before succumbing to COVID-19 at the age of ninety years during the 2020 pandemic.⁴⁴ Malone similarly taught at Howard and was among the founders of the Ellington School in 1974; while Augins joined the Ellington faculty later.⁴⁵

Carew, Hooks, and their partner activists stimulated Washingtonians to embrace the concept of community as an essential building block of the city. They did so in part by proclaiming their presence from the Washington stage. Over time, their ideas have moved from DC neighborhoods into the mainstream of American dramaturgy. The DCBRC's downfall nonetheless left one of the nation's most vibrant centers of African American culture without a fully professional Black theater company.⁴⁶

The Stage Is Set

In 1982, the George Washington University political scientist Jeffrey Henig published an important study of a neighborhood transition about DC's Adams Morgan (the very area that had been the focal point for Topper Carew's New Thing). Henig began by noting that experts on cities expected urban change to be synonymous with decline until well into the 1970s.⁴⁷ Washington now experienced a sense of improvement. Such notions of urban upgrading represented a radical departure from the conventional wisdom in an era of suburban hegemony. Henig noted further that consequent "gentrification" will prove different from "normal change" in the rapidity of divergence from the past, and in the scope of the alterations that take place. All aspects of neighborhood life would be affected in a compressed time.⁴⁸ Consequently, the underlying community organization substructure will fragment before most residents and outsiders recognize what is happening.⁴⁹ A decade or two later, lo-

cal residents well understood that urban neighborhoods could upgrade. But for whom?

Henig captured the beginning of dramatic political, social, and economic transformations both in DC and throughout its metropolitan region.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, home rule—as granted to Washington in 1974—proved to be a nearly fatally flawed legislative compromise that left local officials constantly running up a down escalator. In the enthusiasm of the moment, many legislative fine points limiting taxation authority and retaining congressional oversight authority were lost on young community activists.

The city's appointed mayor, Walter Washington, retained his office in the city's first municipal elections. Marion S. Barry Jr. eventually emerged as master of the new system, serving four terms as mayor and several more on the City Council. The street "radicals" who appeared during the 1960s were now in charge of the city. The role of the arts in providing a surrogate for local political expression began to fade. Meanwhile, theater grew in the city and throughout the region in response to the new communities that were taking shape.

This study of how Washington's local theater scene evolved over the course of the twentieth century is hardly encyclopedic; and certainly, it makes no claim of comprehensiveness. Many compelling themes not covered here—the power of women on the Washington stage; the influence of companies founded by immigrant artists; the emergence of a robust LGBTQ theater community; the authority of Shakespeare in shaping American political discourse—lie beyond the scope of this volume, even as they deserve careful in-depth studies of their own. Rather, this book explores a few among the many stories that can be told about Washington's vibrant theater scene through the lens of urban history—and the unexpectedly dynamic city nurturing it.



Howard Players, 1922
(Photo, HowardPlayers.org)

Chapter 1

Proclaiming Racial Presence

Washington, the national capital, is the center of what is becoming to be regarded as one of the most interesting as well as significant experiments in the development of native American Drama. . . . Now Howard University has undertaken to build upon the slight foundations thus laid a permanent and determined movement for the establishment of a National Negro Theatre similar in general outline to the Irish Theatre at Dublin.

—T. Montgomery Gregory, 1922¹

In 1903, a twenty-year-old journalist who would go on to a distinguished career in journalism, diplomacy, and politics—future US minister to Liberia, Lester Aglar Walton—excitedly told the readers of *The Colored American Magazine* of African American successes on stage.² “The outlook for the Negro on the stage is particularly bright and encouraging,” Walton began. “At no time have colored stage folk been accorded such consideration and loyal support from show managers, the press and the general public. . . . Heretofore, colored shows have only found their way to New York theatres of minor importance; and the crowded houses invariable in evidence where ‘coon’ shows have played have been occasioned more by reason of the meritorious work of the performers than by the popularity of the playhouses.”

To Walton’s mind, “catchy music, mirth-provoking dialogue and mannerisms void of serious lines” had ensured the success of recently produced “coon” shows. “The stage,” he continued,

will be one of the principal factors in ultimately placing the Negro before the public in his true and proper light. Instead of being ridiculed before the foot-lights as has been done for years, a sentiment will be crystallized which will be of an instructive and beneficial nature. It is unfortunate that the members of the White race, generally speaking, do not know the colored man as he is, but merely from impressions formed of him from the observation of a certain element obnoxious—yet usually most conspicuous.

For Walton, “the time for the debut of the colored actor in serious stage work is not far distant.”

Walton was correct when recording that the African American musical—often closer to the popular “coon” minstrel show than to the operetta—had been enjoying success for several years. His assessment of the openness of White audiences to serious stage work, however, would prove optimistic; as would his assessment of race relations generally. Nearly a decade later, the country would elect a new president—Woodrow Wilson—who brought many of the beliefs and folkways of his native South with him to the White House.

The first Southern-born president since the Civil War, Wilson launched a devastating attack on African Americans generally, with policies that had a disproportionate impact on the African American community in Washington. His administration segregated the Federal Civil Service, effectively denying all but menial federal employment to African Americans. This action lay waste to a community in which the stability of a government job could mean the difference between respectability and penury.³ Over half of all twentieth-century legislation restricting the rights of African Americans in the District of Columbia became law during the Wilson presidency. These actions earned Wilson deep enmity among Black Washingtonians for policies that the *Washington Bee* maintained promised the “everlasting damnation to the colored Americans in this country.”⁴

In 2020, University of California, Berkeley researchers Abhay Aneja and Guo Xu sought to determine the impact of the Wilson Administration’s segregationist personnel policies on Black civil servants. After mining personnel documents for 321,470 unique US

federal employees (40,020 Blacks and 281,450 Whites) between 1907 and 1921, Aneja and Xu calculate a “Black wage penalty” of 7 percentage points resulting from the relocation of Black civil servants to lower paying positions.⁵

Aneja and Xu capture the direct detrimental impact of Wilson’s policies on Black civil servants. Given a highly structured promotion hierarchy, demotions to a lower rung echo throughout the careers of Black civil servants both serving at the time and entering government service later.

The impacts of this penalty on families and the Washington African American community are incalculable. Secure, well-compensated federal employment provided an important pillar upon which the community and its businesses built further accomplishment. As Black commentators signaled at the time, the introduction of Jim Crow employment practices under President Wilson had devastating effects on Washington’s African American community.

In 1915, the president hosted a screening of D. W. Griffith’s freshly released epic apologia for the Ku Klux Klan, *The Birth of a Nation*. The viewing—the first time a film had been shown at the White House—was taken by many as an endorsement of a rewriting of post-Civil War history.⁶

Responding on Stage

The Washington African American theater community responded directly to Wilson’s policies with works emphasizing the pernicious impact of Jim Crow. In addition to Angelina Grimké’s *Rachel*, mentioned in the introduction, other prominent authors of the era’s anti-lynching plays included Black women who were living in Washington (including Grimké, Mary Burrill, and Georgia Douglas Johnson), who lived near Washington (Alice Dunbar-Nelson), or who spent time in Washington (Myrtle Smith Livingston).

“As the capital,” Koritha Mitchell contends, “Washington, DC, stood for the nation’s commitment to protecting American life and liberty, but in the 1920s it was where antilynching bills went to die. . . . The genre’s characters become representatives for a national Black population whose concerns are not necessarily shared by their representatives in the Congress and Senate.” DC, she con-

tinues, “held in perfect tension all of the promises that were presumably inherent in the North and the perils that were supposedly more characteristic of the South.”⁷

Theater historians have tended to minimize the artistic achievement of *Rachel* and other antilynching plays. Rather than seek commercial production, their playwrights penned superficially modest one-act works suited for reading and amateur performance in the intimate spaces of family gatherings, school auditoriums, and church halls. They reached their audience by publishing their plays in periodicals with large African American and White activist readerships, such as W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Crisis*, and Max Eastman’s *The Liberator*.⁸ Focusing on sympathetic, well-mannered, dignified characters (e.g., loyal soldiers, committed lawyers, and caring mothers), the plays, according to Mitchell, “did not just need those who would work to gain Whites’ empathy; they also needed individuals who could provide tools for surviving.”⁹

Georgia Douglas Johnson, among the most prolific writers of the genre, disguised creative ambition behind the supposedly simplistic format of such “propaganda” plays. As Mitchell records, Johnson “wrote two versions of a script that dramatizes the moment when White authorities willfully disregard African American voices. One version of Johnson’s *A Sunday Morning in the South* uses hymns from a Black church as background to the action; the other features a White church, but both show that police officers abruptly reject Black testimony.”¹⁰

The Washington antilynching plays reveal how a number of the writers and playwrights gathered in the city would contribute to the emergence of African American theater during the years and decades ahead. The genre’s dramatists responded to the heightened racism of the Wilson era, and to the Southern White barbarism underlying an accelerating rate of lynching. They proclaimed African American presence, personhood, and citizenship by focusing on African American domesticity and the damage inflicted on it by mob violence to assert cultural self-affirmation.¹¹ As Black writers, composers, comedians, and performers had done in expanding the boundaries of American musical theater—and as Black dramatic playwrights and actors would do throughout the twentieth century—the creators of antilynching plays endeavored to bring a fundamental humanity to the portrayal of African Americans.

Their proponents and admirers continued the argument over what constituted Black theater—and who “was in and who was out.” Through their battles, Howard University’s Gregory and Locke discovered a shared belief in the power of realistic portraiture of lower-class life, together with a style of storytelling, stage direction, and set and costume design that was coming to define modernist drama.¹² This shared preference, together with the backing of Dean Kelly Miller, drove Gregory’s attempts to elevate the university’s drama club to the more ambitious Howard Players.

Miller argues in *Theorizing Black Theatre* that this strain began to form much earlier in turn-of-the-century efforts to establish an African American musical theater (as evident in the very first full-length African American written musical comedies—Bob Cole’s *A Trip to Coontown*, 1898; and Will Marion Cook’s *Jes’ Lak White Fo’ks*, 1899). The contrast between Cole and Cook rested, for Miller, in the opposition of a focus on the “Outer Life” (represented by Cole’s interest in society) and the “Inner Life” (exemplified by Cook’s focus on performance). Those distinctions, he continued, trace their origins back to African performance philosophies as well as to divisions within European tradition and evolved over time into a distinction between “propaganda” and “art” evident in the controversy over Angelina Grimké’s *Rachel*.¹³ The Washington row brought focus to what had been often inchoate differences in sensibility.

A Child of Howard University Returns

Thomas Montgomery Gregory’s appointment in 1910 to Howard University’s English Department as an instructor was a homecoming. Gregory—who had just graduated from Harvard as a member of the illustrious Class of 1910, where he studied alongside T. S. Eliot, Walter Lippmann, John Reed, Hsi Yun Feng, and Hamilton Fish Jr.—had grown up on the Howard campus. His father transferred to the university from Oberlin College in 1868, becoming the first student to enroll in the collegiate department. He became valedictorian of the university’s three-member initial graduating class.

Upon completing his degree, the elder Gregory joined the faculty and the household moved onto the Howard campus.¹⁴ The