

*SPOTLIGHTING AFRICAN-
AMERICAN LIBERATION AND
RESISTANCE IN BLACK
THEATRE*

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Interest in Research




Research Question(s)

- What kind of space exists for marginalized groups and how do they either create their own space outside of what's socially provided or make space within the mainstream circle for inclusivity and equality?
- How does Hatiloo Theatre, as the only black repertory theatre in Tennessee and five of its surrounding states, contribute to the narrative of African-American resistance and liberation in the city of Memphis?




PROCESS

Research Material

- Mostly used first-hand testimonies of black community members/actors
 - Used newspaper articles and interviews to determine common narratives surrounding Hatiloo as the only black theatre in Memphis and to discover if there are any counter-narratives
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Challenges

- Getting direct statements/perspectives from official Hatiloo representatives was difficult, so I had to shift my research and was only able to talk to community members/actors, whose input is just as important
 - Having to shift my initial question to IF Hattiloo plays a role in African-American resistance and liberation from HOW
 - Realizing that just because organizations are black-lead/businesses are black-owned does not inherently make them liberating; they are institutions
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*HISTORICAL
CONTEXT*

Minstrelsy Era



- Developed in the early 19th century and reached its height in the late 1800s/early 1900s
 - Named after the European “minstrel” entertainer who performed for medieval nobility
 - Form of popularized American entertainment that featured comic skits, variety acts, music, and dance with African/Irish origins
 - Relied heavily on racist humor
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Black Resistance During the Minstrelsy Era

- Did not completely eradicate white supremacy/racism
- Was not overt; black minstrel artists had to be very subversive when trying to use their work to make political statements
- Artists placed heavy emphasis on the separation of their onscreen roles with their real life identities because they struggled with being considered “serious” actors
- Incorporated space for exclusive dialogue with black audience members
- Used their fame/success to shed light on the realities of the system, but that fame/success did not exempt them from its constraints

Harlem Renaissance



- Took place in the 1920s
 - Began in Harlem, a black neighborhood in New York that came to be considered a black cultural mecca
 - Primarily occupied with forging a new identity for the black American separate from that which was developed during the minstrel era and redefining black culture as it was understood from a white perspective
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Black Resistance During the Harlem Renaissance

- Black theatre of the Renaissance worked to represent authentic black life onstage
- Promoted racial uplift/black pride
- Mass cultural production
- Received mainstream white acceptance




Black Arts Movement (BAM)




- Arose from the Black Power Movement and was thus founded on the same principles of self-determination and nationhood
 - Advocated functional black art, for and by black people, with no regard for mainstream acceptance or Eurocentric artistic values
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Black Resistance During the BAM


- Explicitly political
 - Aimed to destruct/restructure westernized artistic standards in the minds of African-Americans
 - United influx of black artistic development
 - Focus on using art to evoke black consciousness
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FINDINGS


Findings

- Hatiloo has provided a gateway into theatrical careers for many black artists
 - It has also established itself as a center for support and networking among black dramatists
 - Participates in community outreach programs
 - It fosters positive values through the work
 - Representation
 - Confidence/uplift
 - Community
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Findings

- Hattiloo has received criticism for its lack of accessibility to the black community in Memphis
 - One of the main principles of the BAM was to showcase the entire black experience and all its different aspects, and Hattiloo has failed to do so in some cases
 - It has received specific critique of its negation of black LGBTQ+ narratives
 - Concern has been voiced about its priority of producing “what sells” over producing a variety of black narratives
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Surprise! More Findings

- Although Hatiloo has its faults, it is ultimately an institution that has to operate as the sole black theatre in this region while simultaneously dealing with a system built on racism and classism
 - Just as Hatiloo is not inherently resistant because it is a black theatre space, black theatre does not have to take place in a black repertory theatre to qualify as revolutionary/resistant
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