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Spotlighting African-American Liberation and Resistance in Black Theatre

RHODES INSTITUTE FOR REGIONAL STUDIES
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During the spring semester of my freshman year at Rhodes College, I had the wonderful opportunity to participate in McCoy Theatre's production of *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* by Ntozake Shange. A choreopoem that presents the everyday challenges and triumphs of black American women through poetry, dance, music, and song, *for colored girls* was done as a senior project by Rhodes student Brittney Threatt to create more space for actresses of color on campus—specifically, black actresses—and my role as the Lady in Red served as my onstage debut. Initially, I felt skeptical about auditioning for the play because I'd never been involved with any kind of drama before. In fact, I came close to deciding against it because I struggled to understand how joining the cast would benefit me or the Rhodes community. Little did I know just how much of an impact *for colored girls* would have on me as a female student of color at a predominantly white institution, and how I would continue to carry those effects with me both inside and outside the Rhodes gates.

Multicultural students make up thirty percent of the college's student population. African-American students make up less than fifteen percent. For some white students, this is the most diverse learning environment in which they have been immersed. For a large number of black students, it is the least diverse educational institution they've experienced. Consequently, there is a significant sociocultural disconnect among Rhodes students. I can only speak for my experience with the black/white dichotomy. Although Rhodes was officially integrated over fifty years ago, discussions related to race outside of certain classrooms are often met with uncomfortable body shifts, nervous glances, and even outright discouragement from some members of the Rhodes community—students and faculty alike.

Had I not been given the opportunity to participate in the S.O.S. multicultural program, which allowed me to move in before school began and introduced me to other students of color

in my class, I might have felt overwhelmed by the vast wave of white students who came to Rhodes. But that program gave me my first friends, a bond of black women who understood what struggles I would face here and would offer support when the burden of being a black student at a predominantly white institution became too much. Other than the Black Student Association, there were no African-American-lead student organizations. Of the nine historically black Greek organizations founded nationally, only three were present my first year and none of them had a space on campus, unlike the predominantly white Greek organizations, who all have houses in which they can gather. The few black students who attended Rhodes were scattered in different departments, some being the only black bodies in many of their courses. And in addition to the daily microaggressions and overt racism we were forced to grapple with, African-Americans were very poorly represented in both academic and social realms.

So, *for colored girls* did several things. For one, the announcement of the show's spring run was the first time I'd ever heard of the Rhodes theatre program featuring lead roles for black women that accurately depicted their lived experiences. Additionally, being a part of *for colored girls* and receiving the overwhelming amount of support we did not only made me realize how valuable representation can be to those who are underrepresented, but also brought me to a better understanding of how that representation operates for those who are adequately represented, which in this case would be the rest of Rhodes' mostly white community. Having my white classmates see me portray a character with a leading narrative—and not as a side plot or mere comic relief, as black actors are so often restricted to—was important because it demonstrated that black narratives are just as valid as more popular, traditionally Eurocentric narratives are, and they thus deserve to be told more on the McCoy stage. Furthermore, the authenticity of the stories told in *for colored girls* helped reshape the way in which black women are viewed on

campus by diminishing the stereotypes attached to and promoted through other mainstream plays.

My experience with *for colored girls* made me both understand and appreciate the power of dramatic expression and caused me to question why opportunities for African-American theatrical space are limited not only at Rhodes, but also in the larger Memphis community. There is only one African-American repertory theatre in the state of Tennessee and five of its surrounding states, and it happens to be located in Memphis. Moreover, the nation as a whole significantly lacks successful black theatres compared to the amount of well-established traditional theatres; in Memphis alone, for example, there are at least three, not including performance halls and venues (Hattiloo "History"). As the only African-American repertory theatre in the region, Hattiloo would appear to inherently represent a site of black liberation, representing African-American resistance to white supremacy and systematic oppression, especially in a segregated city with historical significance in the slave trade and Civil Rights Movement and continuing tension. In 2018, after two centuries of existence, Memphis is *still* a city that twists narratives about black freedom struggles (and black lives) to appeal to white, affluent citizens. Theatre is, after all, a white-dominated space, as it has been for centuries despite the many contributions made to the artform by black Americans. Theatre—as both art and an institution—represents one of the many spaces where black people have been and still are constrained by the confines of white American society. Despite this, it is one of the least discussed. This paper aims to correct this deficiency, placing the history of black theatre and the activities of Hattiloo Theatre in dialogue.

Understanding the history of black theatre requires acknowledging the larger erasure of black experiences in the United States. Much of the history of black people in the United States

has not been written about, not even from a black point of view. Black enslaved people did not have the luxury of preserving their history through records. They were kept illiterate by their white captors and even after slavery ended remained impeded by Jim Crow laws. But their stories survived and were passed down with origins in the authentic shows—not the minstrel caricature created by white comedians—as a ritual that came from "plantation playtimes around the Negro cabins" (Hill and Hatch 22.). Moreover, oral histories and storytelling traveled from generation to generation, keeping the timeline of the black American experience intact (Hill and Hatch xvi). Nonetheless, the scarcity of the records of this history—written, oral, and photographic—and the lack of accounts given by African-Americans themselves resulted in their stories being recounted largely through a white racial gaze.

Perhaps one of the most prominent manifestations of this sentiment is Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In the divide between the North and South during the Civil War, theatre was a heavy influence on public attitudes toward race (Hill and Hatch 52) Despite Stowe's sketches being supposedly anti-slavery and meant to "awaken sympathy and feeling for the African race", the theatrical adaptation perpetuated harmful stereotypes and semi-permanently determined that black performers are destined solely for comic buffoonery and song-and-dance entertainment (Hill and Hatch 55). Furthermore, Beecher "produced in Uncle Tom a character who persuaded white racists that Blacks would accept the intolerable conditions of serfdom without fighting back" (Hill and Hatch 60). This production is a direct result of attempting to share the black experience from a white standpoint. It only fixed in society's mind "the black performers' role onstage as song-and-dance comedy/comic buffoonery" (Hill and Hatch 57). While the play provided opportunities for black actors and brought about the very

beginning stages of integrated theatre, they were not fulfilling opportunities and black actors were not even cast as lead roles.

Montgomery Gregory's 1925 essay, "The Drama of Negro Life" marked *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as one of the first instances of an attempt at presenting to American society "in a realistic manner the authentic life of the Negro" (*New Negro* 154). The essay was included in an anthology of writings by African-American thinkers and writers in response to the mistreatment of their people during the Jim Crow era. Published by Alan Locke almost a century after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was issued, *The New Negro* embodied the "new dynamic phase" into which the black community was compelled to enter, one that encouraged a renewed sense of self-respect. According to Locke, this sentiment was to be reflected in all aspects of African-American culture, including theatre. He presented a "new vision of opportunity, social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll, a chance for the improvement of conditions" (*New Negro* 7). For Locke, this opportunity starts with *actually* realistically presenting to the American public "the authentic life of the Negro", not the harmfully assumed experience provided by Stowe's work. From a theatrical standpoint, this entails shedding black performance of its projected roots in comedy and minstrelsy.

Years later, the poet Imamu Amiri Baraka helped give birth to the Black Arts Movement took place during the 1960s and early 1970s. Otherwise known as the Black Aesthetic Movement, BAM grew out of the Black Power Movement, characterized—like the larger campaign—by an emphasis on demonstrating the distinctivess of black identity apart from white Americanism. Theorist Larry Neal—whose work focused specifically on black theatre—connected the two movements by saying that the political principles of the Black Power Movement found "concrete expression" in the aesthetics of African-American artists (Neal 272).

The rejuvenation of black culture inspired by these movements partly served as a response to blackface minstrel shows and the "society of spectacle" that developed during Cold War capitalism. Through BAM assertions, black artists were finally able to develop their own means by which they could represent themselves onstage. (Sell 227, 233)

Much of this focused on the creation of literal and figurative spaces. The Black Arts Movement insisted on art that spoke directly to the needs and aspirations of black Americans after fighting for so long to share in the fruits of white European values guised as a universal melting pot. (Neal 273). In 1996, actor and director Avery Wilson echoed these ideas when he advocated for more authentic representation in mainstream theatre in his "Ground" speech. He attributed this goal to the ideas of self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense that drove the Black Arts Movement. Wilson asserted that assimilation attempts are harmful because they abandon the investigation of black culture and history in favor of white acceptance. This new rejection of all previous forms of Western art was in itself a political statement because up until this point, black artists were forced to express their experiences and nurture their crafts within the confines of white artistic conventions. There was an apparent dichotomy between envisioning an art that fulfilled the desires of self-determination and surrendering culture to America's universal melting pot for the sake of being truly American (Wilson, "Ground").

As an African-American student at Rhodes College and in Memphis, my minimal involvement with theatre on a predominantly white campus has lead me to question what kind of space exists for marginalized groups and how they either create their own space outside of what's socially provided or make space within the mainstream circle for inclusivity and equality. The presence of Hattiloo Theatre intensifies and clarifies this question. Must black theatre have its own physical space to contribute to the bigger cause of black resistance? Moreover, does a

successful black theatre necessarily act as a space of resistance and liberation? If there is no real space for marginalized groups, is it better to create their own outside of what is socially provided or to make space within the mainstream circle for inclusivity and equality?

To answer these questions, I must first clarify what my definition of liberation is: the act of setting someone free from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression. In order to achieve liberation, oppressive structures and systems have to be reimagined and altered in favor of the oppressed. With this definition in mind, I aim to investigate if and/or how Hattiloo Theatre restructures the community it serves, because the *potential* for systematic pushback is evident. Hattiloo is a non-profit organization with a large dependence on donations and community investment, which unavoidably influences the subject matter it tackles onstage, where it is located, and the type of audience it attracts. With no federal support, Hattiloo Theatre is largely donor-funded. This creates a dilemma, since any attempt to align its values with the principles of the Black Arts Movement through radical theatre will necessarily confront the inclination to assimilate for the sake of remaining successful.

Before tackling the sociopolitical impact of Hatiloo Theatre, though, it is important to understand fully the historical context within which it operates. There are three significant eras of black performance that hold particular relevance, all of which are characterized by their overt political agenda and their reckoning with how black theatrical spaces might influence the larger cause of liberation: Black Minstrelsy, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Black Arts Movement. Though they do so to different extents, each moment in the history of black art—specifically, black theatre—demonstrates the powerful influence that African-American culture has had on mainstream society and the ways in which black American artists contributed to the black freedom struggle against the hostility of white America. While unpacking the impact of these

three eras, I will also connect them to contemporary instances in the Memphis theatre sphere. Together, they serve to weave an ongoing narrative of resistance through black dramatic expression that can be mapped back to Hattiloo Theatre and its role as the sole African-American repertory theatre in Memphis.

Minstrelsy, or minstrel shows, was the first form of popular American commercial entertainment. It began when a group of four white men began performing as the Virginia Minstrels, a traveling show that soon grew into a thriving business featuring both white and black companies. All four men were born in northern states but claimed to have acquired the material for their skits from what they observed in their trips down South. The first minstrel show featured a "Mr. Interlocutor", a more serious character, usually dressed more elegantly than the others, and the "end-men", a group of silly, trickster-like men who dressed theatrically as enslaved men from southern plantations. Blackface was used to darken their skin and appear more like "darkies" onstage. Mass production brought about by the new industrial age made it easier to market racial stereotypes through imagery in caricatures, food labels, and song sheets (Sotiropoulos 3).

The origins of minstrelsy performance are actually derived from African-Americans and Irish refugees. The Irish potato famine caused an influx of Irish immigrants in the urban dwellings of Northeast America, where they moved into neighborhoods occupied by black Americans who either fled the South as "contraband" slaves or had been northern freeman. Both racial groups suffered severe poverty and prejudice, and their close associations with each other in their home and work lives lead to a mutual appreciation for music, song, and dance. Although these mixed communities did not prevent Irish people from discriminating against their black neighbors—they participated in acts of racial prejudice and violence—they each adopted certain

things from the other and would put on small performances within their own communities. Eventually, the two distinct styles of dance—Irish clog dancing and African gliding—were melded into what is now known as minstrel juba dancing. White performers often used these types of movements in their minstrel shows. They even bragged about their work being authentically “Negro”, and they were usually able to get away with it because most black music was legally unprotected due to the illiteracy of many African-Americans. (Hill and Hatch 99)

This, however, did not stop history from recognizing some moments of African-American artistic innovation. William Henry Lane, also known as Juba, was the first black dancer to be widely recognized as a minstrel performer and master of juba dancing. Marion Winter asserts that it was his influence which “kept minstrel dance…in touch with the integrity of Negro source material”. Additionally, his ability to create beats with his feet is what many at least partly credit with the creation of modern-day tap dancing. Lane serves as an example of how black performers heavily influenced mainstream American performance and culture. (Hill and Hatch 99)

But white audiences were not concerned with that aspect of minstrelsy. It became an American entertainment phenomenon because working-class whites across America reveled in the mockery of black people. Poor white immigrants from Europe sought refuge from their circumstances in minstrel show-induced laughter and song; and although northern abolitionists fought ardently to increase awareness about the horrors of slavery, many working-class people “preferred the alternate, sentimental version provided by minstrelsy: Blacks were happy in bondage”. While Dale Cockrell and William Mahar assert that in early days of minstrelsy “black-faced characters may not have been caricatures of African-Americans, but simply clowns of various sorts,” Hill argues that the “long and convoluted use of blackface internationally

cannot be take here". Given the history of slavery in America, it is safe to say that at that point, audiences immediately associated blackface with its racial implications, and they enjoyed the utilization of race as a source of debasing humor (Hill and Hatch 96, 97).

Despite the dehumanizing nature of minstrelsy, black performers entered the business shortly after the Civil War and managed to use it to their advantage. In the years following Reconstruction, during the development of Jim Crow, black Americans had few avenues for advancement, so a wave of black artists capitalized on white America's obsession with racially authentic minstrel show acts while also accepting that this promising entertainment industry was built on racism; in fact, they were encouraged to perpetuate the demeaning stereotypes in order to achieve commercial success. (Sotiropoulos 1) Nonetheless, it did offer—even if in a limited manner—a way to support themselves financially, to hone their acting craft, and fulfill their desires to perform. It also provided the means for black artists to resist white hegemony in their own ways, ignite political engagement with the rest of American society through their work, and communicate with other African-Americans through dramatic expression.

One way that black performers challenged white supremacy was by drawing heavy attention to the separation of their roles onstage with their lives offstage. They wanted more than anything to be recognized for their talents as professional actors, much like middle-class African-Americans sought to be seen as "respectable" by mainstream society (Sotiropoulos 10). They had what W. E. B. Dubois coined as "double consciousness" in his work *The Souls of Black Folks*: "…this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (Dubois 215). Yes, they were fully aware of the purpose they served for white audiences, but they also yearned to move past being just a source of comic minstrel relief; they wanted to be associated with serious drama.

Ernest Hogan, a well-known black minstrel performer, attempted to do that when his new writing changed the tradition of "the merely funny, rather silly 'end-man' into a character with a definite plot in a rather loosely constructed but nonetheless well outlined story" (*New Negro* 162). It unfortunately did not completely destroy the boundary between "coon acts" and operetta, but as Sotiropoulos states, it at least blurred the line (47). She also points out that black performers were "always conscious that they were performing stage types" but "they manipulated the stage mask in innovative ways that helped the for a space for dialogue with their black audiences—dialogue that included both assertions of black nationhood and critique of the racism that perpetuated stereotyped imagery" (2). For example, Bert Williams, a renowned black comedian of the minstrel era, did full-length shows with his colleagues that celebrated his community and spoke against Jim Crow laws. It is true that he performed for segregated audiences, but he often incorporated tactics like inside jokes—as seen through articles by theatre critics who took note of moments when black audiences laughed but whites didn't—to connect to his fellow brethren in the balcony (6).

Eli Williams, a contemporary local black actor can relate to Williams' dilemma accompanied by performing black material for a mostly white audience. He points out in the interview I had with him that though the demographics vary, he has experienced "a lot of white audiences, like older white women dragging their husbands…of course [they] still get the African-American audience, but I would probably say [they] get more white audience members…that's been kind of a challenge, but it's needed" (Williams).

Multiple factors contribute to this assertion. Firstly, Hattiloo is situated in what scholar Elena Delavega's 2017 Poverty Fact Sheet explains is one of the poorest cities in the United States; in 2016, it was ranked third out of 34 on the poverty rank among Cities with Populations

Greater than 500,000. Minorities in Memphis are most affected by poverty, so while the city is 60% African-American, 32.3% of black Memphis residents are living in poverty (based on data from 2016). More audience members, then, are probably white because that is the racial demographic most likely to afford show tickets, even if the show does contain messages about the black experience. Additionally, the Memphis public transportation makes getting from one part of the city to another extremely difficult. Buses often run late, if at all, so some city residents don't even come across Hattiloo because circumstances keep them in the vicinity of their own social spheres, unaware of the work that Hattiloo is doing. Williams himself is a Memphis native—currently residing in Whitehaven, a predominantly African-American neighborhood—and had not heard of Hattiloo until his mother's coworker mentioned it to him.

The work of African-American minstrel actors in no way expunged racist stereotypes or directly caused the liberation of their race. Ernest Hogan and Bert Williams acquired fame and acceptance from white audiences, but they were just as susceptible to racism and violence as any other black American. Furthermore, the success they achieved signified how "increasingly visible" and "powerful" the black urban community was becoming (Sotiropoulos 44). Whites were threatened by the influence of African-American artists. Furthermore, critics of their own race have remained skeptical of their participation in minstrel shows. Novelist and critic Ludwig Lewisohn asserts that they have "little to no value as art, as an expression of either the Negro individual or the Negro race" and thus do nothing to achieve black liberation (*New Negro* 156). In spite of the prevailing hostility they faced from both sides, black minstrel performers persisted in utilizing their fame and visibility to further their political agenda through enlightenment. Writing in 1905, at the height (or perhaps depth) of blackface's popularity, actor and musician Aida Overton Walker asserts that the profession of black performance "does more toward

alleviation of color prejudice than any other profession among colored people. The fact of the matter is, that we come in contact with more white people in a week than other professional colored people meet in a year" (Walker, *Colored American Magazine 9*, Oct. 1905, 571-575).

This sentiment is reflected in the latter portion of Eli Williams' statement. Whites have historically taken interest in black performance, as demonstrated by the American minstrel show craze, the investment in black art created during the Harlem Renaissance, and even the arrival of hip hop—an art form birthed from the challenges of racism and violence associated with living in a modern-day black urban space—into the homes of white suburbia. Presently, black drama continues to be consumed by white audiences, but those stories *need* to be told. White audiences need to be exposed to narratives different from their own, a task Hatiloo Theatre attempts to accomplish. It started with the work of minstrelsy. Indeed, even with the persistent challenge of white supremacy, black minstrel performers helped push racial advancement—it was, at the very least, a start in the organized resistance through black theatrical expression.

Following and responding to the minstrel age of black drama was the Harlem Renaissance, a name used to describe the development of Harlem, New York City as a black cultural center and the black artistic reawakening that followed. After World War I, thousands of African-Americans relocated to northern cities from the rural South in search of new opportunity, also hoping to escape the growing intensity of Jim Crow rule; for there was a popular assumption that the "Negro problem" belonged exclusively to the south. A new budding population of black folks in New York City made Harlem into a neighborhood of wealth and innovation. Also referred to as the New Negro Movement, the Harlem Renaissance spanned the 1920s, about 30 years after the decline of minstrelsy. Historian Errol Hill, states in his anthology of black theatre, however, that the "Negro was not 'new', although opportunity was" (Hill and

Hatch 215). A new sense of racial pride spread, and the resulting art served to "uplift" the race through "group expression" and "self-determination" (*New Negro* 7). This particularly era was primarily occupied with forging a new identity for the black American and redefining black culture as it was understood from a white perspective, which began to recognize their intellectual capacities. Indeed, "white American had awakened to them" (Hill and Hatch 215).

African-American performers took after this emerging ideology and were no longer satisfied with conforming to white expectations associated with minstrelsy. Theatre of the Harlem Renaissance worked to re-present the black experience onstage in a truly authentic way: "The day of 'aunties', 'uncles', and 'mammies' is equally gone. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on…The popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of the facts" (*New Negro* 5). Furthermore, as Alan Locke suggests in the introduction to his anthology, "mutual understanding is basic for any subsequent cooperation and adjustment" (9). So, a big part in gaining the respect of white America was to convey the black experience in a way with which they could *empathize*.

Empathy plays a significant role in the achievement of black liberation through drama. This was a facet of the Harlem Renaissance, but even today, African-Americans actors recognize the value of theatre as a vehicle for resistance through storytelling. When asked what values Sarah Brown* has gained from her involvement with theatre as a black actress and director, she discusses how much her capacity to empathize grew the more work she did. One of her mentors taught her that "theatre is essentially…ask the question, 'What does it mean to be human? You know, what does it mean to be human when you're playing the ingenue, what does it mean to be human when you're playing the hero, when you're playing the villain?" (Brown). She goes on to testify that one's instinct to cast judgement is silenced when one is trained to try and understand

where a person is coming from. Justin Matthews, when asked how being in theatre has shaped him mentally, answered that "with theatre I've been able to look at things a little bit differently. I've been able to talk to people a lot differently. I've been able to have different conversations and be able to sort of just really be connected with someone" (Matthews). The value of empathy is thus vital when grappling with the topic of black drama as a form of resistance. White audiences, up until the Harlem Renaissance, were only presented with false depictions of African-American life; therefore, these were the depictions they empathized with, making it extremely difficult to imagine a society of racial equality. Granted, they preferred the misrepresentation of the black experience onstage because it was easier to maintain white hegemony by portraying black Americans as nothing more than silly clowns not be taken seriously. But by Locke's logic, having the black man be "known for what he is, even in his faults and shortcomings" is a key step in obtaining freedom (*New Negro* 11).

This leads to another important component of achieving black liberation through drama: truth. As stated by Bobby Nealson, a black theatrical veteran of Memphis, "…to express yourself, to express yourself honestly, it's a great thing…I think that black theatre itself is liberating. It's a certain boldness that comes with it. The audacity to tell your story." (Nealson) This sentiment applies to both theatre as an art form and theatre as an institution. For African-American actors in the late nineteenth century, telling the truth was dangerous. Black theatre had not yet been established as a valid art form—to some, it is still not considered "real" theatre—and black artists were working within the confines of white supremacy. To venture outside of those confines meant risking career loss (Krasner 11). Charles Gilpin, one of the most renown stage actors of the Harlem Renaissance Era, found himself jobless when he first tried to re-present himself and his race onstage. For, "apparently, colored folks were not supposed to be

regular human beings, with knowledge of life. They were just human eccentricities, that did certain old tricks, wore certain kinds of queer clothes, and were funny" (Gilpin, "Where Do I go from here?"). But, during the Harlem Renaissance and other eras, black performers nonetheless felt a certain responsibility to relay the truth of the black experience to their audiences. While the theatre carves out a space for empathy within the intimacy of the performer-audience relationship, it only remains as a potential source of liberation if the audience is consuming an honest narrative about black American life.

Many scholars use the Great Depression to mark the end of the Harlem Renaissance. The stock market crashed, and the resulting economic disparity struck the once-wealthy village of Harlem with poverty. Artists were fired from their positions and both working- and middle-class consumers suffered from unemployment, unable to indulge in the dramatic arts so eloquently contrived during the New Negro Movement. The Harlem Renaissance moment lasted for about a decade—a little longer according to some scholars—but its significance can be traced to Hattiloo Theatre. Just as Harlem became a headquarter of sorts for black artists and intellectuals, Hattiloo has marketed itself as a center for black theatrical exploration. In early 2016, the *Memphis Flyer* published an online article about the expansion of Hattiloo with a Development Center. According to Chris Davis, the author of the article, Hattiloo "has never been a playhouse only. It has doubled as a teaching space, cultural center, and hub for artists". Since it relocated from Marshall Street to Midtown in 2014, it has hosted "everything from book clubs to film festivals to conversations about social justice" (Davis, "The Hattiloo Theatre to Expand"). Justin Matthews, a local black actor and student, commends Hattiloo on the some of the work they have done regarding community outreach (Matthews). Bobby Nealson recently attended a workshop at Hattiloo and is appreciative of the educational programs it offers for artists like himself

(Nealson). Linda Smith observed from her position as an intern at Hattiloo its role in the Memphis theatre world: "…before Hattiloo came about, there were a lot of people doing a lot of different things…black artists doing a lot of, a lot of different things in different communities…from what I've seen in my opinion, it gave a center for black theatre, gave you a regular place that you could go and expect, you know, quality work and quality representation of black theatre and black artists" (Smith). Eli Williams appreciates his relationship with Hattiloo because it gave him the means by which to consider himself an "active artist", provided opportunities to refine his acting skills, and "immerse [himself] in that world so that [he] can leverage from that and go even further" (Williams). Hattiloo is a site of black representation, education, and networking for black performers and theatre-goers, and has clearly set itself up as a potential space for black liberation and resistance.

But the final moment on the timeline of black artistic resistance, the Black Arts Movement, birthed a new way of thinking about black theatre, and its principles place Hattiloo's role as Memphis' only black repertory theatre in question. BAM sprang out from the Black Power Movement, which was inspired as a direct response to the Civil Rights Movement. As we understand it today, the Civil Rights Movement was a social movement fueled by the goal of achieving real equality for African-Americans and abolishing the discriminatory structures of segregation and aim for equal opportunity in all occupational fields, public education, and housing. Taking place in the 1950s and 60s, the Civil Rights Movement ultimately reached one of its main goals through the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. This granted all African-Americans the right to vote.

However, the black freedom struggle did not end with the Voting Rights Act, and while the nonviolent nature of the Civil Rights Movement shifted into the more militant, quasi-national

nature of the Black Power Movement, the same shift occurred in the theatre. Several leaders of the latter, in fact, critiqued the Civil Rights Movement for its overtly pacific protest tactics. And as the face of the movement, Martin Luther King Jr. preached nonviolence to his followers as a means of achieving liberation: “King’s dream was that by confronting white resistance with nonviolent determination, he would arouse the sympathy of white liberals. This in turn would induce the government to pass civil rights legislation which would legitimize integration as the American Way of Life” (Boggs 33). For King and other southern African-Americans, as Larry Neal points out, the means of liberation was shaped out of “the black man’s spiritual legacy” (Neal 13). Christianity was a big part of southern black culture, and the southern church is essentially what birthed the movement. It explains the ethical principle upon which King built his nonviolent rhetoric. And to a certain degree, it worked.

Unfortunately, King’s dedication to the struggle cost him his life. He was assassinated on April 4th, 1968 at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. The city has since then built the National Civil Right Museum at the site of his murder, where people visit annually. Just this past year was the 50th anniversary of his murder and the museum hosted a commemoration of his life and death. Although it was presented as a community-wide event and contained productive speeches with good insight and motivation to continue the struggle that King helped catalyze, it also brought to life a narrative that Memphis must contend with: the fight for civil rights died when King died 50 years ago. Justice has been attained for all, and this city is now far removed from its history of slave trading and segregation.

Sarah Brown recounted a touching experience she had at one of the MLK50 events in the interview I conducted with her, one that, like some of the other events was “very accessible and very fruitful”. But as she also points out, “Most of MLK50 was a bunch of events that people

couldn't really get to because the tickets were $200, um, and it was a black-tie event". Keeping in mind the context of Memphis being 60% African-American a large portion of that population living in poverty, it leads one to ask the same question that Sarah asked herself: "Who's this for?" (Brown) Are events like MLK50 really just meant to commemorate the black struggle, or are they meant to appeal other groups of people? Is it just a guise for Memphis to make itself seem more progressive? In a way, MLK50 can be thought of as a theatrical performance produced by the city to represent and celebrate the black experience. But its inaccessibility to the underprivileged black community in Memphis insinuates that the very people who this event is meant to serve, are not truly represented, or valued. In this sense, it was not a liberating space because it did not actually alter the system that oppresses those communities. The same questions can be applied to Hattiloo Theatre, and they will be further discussed as they relate to Hattiloo later in this paper.

Sarah pointed out that for her, it wasn't so much about the true narratives about black life in Memphis being misconstrued to satisfy the affluent white community, but more about what has been erased from those narratives altogether: "The more that I found out and discover about the tragedies that have not only happened on our streets, but streets that have been named after those tragedies, um, not learning or knowing about them until my late 20s, 30s…and not because I didn't look, but because there's so little written about it". One of those streets is Jackson Avenue, named after President Andrew Jackson, who forced the relocation of indigenous peoples during the Trail of Tears. That street leads to the Mississippi River, where many of them were either placed in boats and taken away or killed for insubordination. (Brown) Stories like these are not typically covered in school, or not told to the public. Hattiloo Theatre, as a black repertory

theatre, has the space to highlight these narrative and bring them to the forefront, keeping harmful counternarratives like those that came from MLK50 from reaching full fruition.

For Malcom X and the founders of the Black Power Movement, King's nonviolent approach to desegregation was not enough. More than that, it grappled with the wrong thing. Neal asserts in his essay that "we found ourselves reacting to the most obvious manifestations of white racism while failing very often, to penetrate the core of the problem" (9). And to him, the problem was the issue of power. Unlike the black social leaders of the south, Neal, Malcom X, and other northern leaders emphasized the need for self-determination and nationhood, for "…the simple acquisition of those rights which abstractly belong to all citizens of the United States would in no fundamental manner alter the oppressive situation in which we found ourselves" (10). These leaders acknowledged the legitimacy of the Civil Rights Movement and applaud the strides it made in winning the black freedom struggle, but for them, "the concept of integration strongly implied an uncritical acceptance of a white value system" and thus, should not have been the main focus. Instead, Malcom's idea for black liberation included black consciousness, separatism, self-defense, and nationhood. Neal attributes all of these ideas to contemporary black nationalism (27). So, when political activist James Boggs presents two different questions that black Americans face—one being whether, or how, black and white Americans can live together in harmony and the other being whether, or how they can co-exist and separate entities—the Black Power Movement chooses to ask the second (33).

It was from this ideology that the Black Arts Movement was formed. In the spring of 1964, Imamu Amiri Baraka—otherwise known as LeRoi Jones—and a number of other black artists founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School in Harlem whose purpose was to forge a union between the arts and politics (Neal 274). And although it ended due to both internal and

external factors, its existence was a manifestation of what the BAM stood for. As Eugene Perkins points out in his essay *Its Challenge and Responsibility,* this newfound, unified focus on black cultural production: "'The New Negro' of the twenties, about whom Alaine Locke wrote, had sought, in many respects, a similar type of expression to articulate his identity and cultural heritage" (86). Indeed, the Black Arts Movement mirrored the Harlem Renaissance in its overflow of black art. But the BAM also aimed to correct what—in its founders' opinion—the Harlem Renaissance failed to do: nurture black culture without including white America in either physical spaces or figurative narratives. Neal goes as far as to call the Renaissance a failure because it did not foster black nationalism: "it failed to take roots, to link itself concretely to the struggles of that community, to become its voice and spirit" (Neal 290). Moreover, from the same perspective, white acceptance of black culture during the Harlem Renaissance defeated the entire purpose of the movement. Loften Mitchell articulates this sentiment in his essay *I Work Here to Please You*: "At the outset, these Harlem ventures were black indeed—created by black people for the enjoyment of black people…But the invasion by whites into the Harlem area brought rank commercialism to the fore" (Loften 299). Their contribution to the success of black art in Harlem lead to many black artists conforming to what white consumers wanted to see from them, even as they also created important spaces of resistance through their work.

The BAM thus specifically aimed to revolutionize black art and completely set it apart from Eurocentric standards. More than that, it aimed to do away with westernized artistic perspectives and dedicated itself to expressing the truth of the oppressed and not the oppressor. It was meant to directly reflect the values of the Black Power Movement, and thus intended to inspire and directly speak to the needs of black America. The two movements were not mutually exclusive; in fact, according to Neal, "Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black

Power concept" (Neal 272). Therefore, the art of the BAM was not to be created for the sake of creating art because according to activist and pioneering Afrocentric theorist Ron Karenga, "all art reflects the value system from which it comes…Art does not exist in the abstract just like freedom does not exist in the abstract…it lives through us and through the meaning and message we give it" (Karenga 37). Leaders of the BAM advocated for all black art to serve the purpose of contributing to the resistance effort. There are three characteristics it must have: functionality, collectiveness, and commitment (33). In other words, it has to whole-heartedly be politically charged with material that will both include and elevate the African-American community.

Black theatre enters the conversation as what Larry Neal states is "potentially the most social of all the arts" because "it is an integral part in the socializing process" (Neal 279). This gives it a certain responsibility to incorporate all aspects of the black experience, depicting absolute expression of ourselves and our lives. Doing so should do two things: expose the black community to an alternative set of models that don't include western influences—demonstrating how valuable the new models are despite efforts to devalue them—and provide them with the courage and the means to resist white racism. According to the BAM, black theatre has to be just that: black. It has to take space in black spaces, and it must be carried out by black people, for black people. If it does not abide by these guidelines, it is not fulfilling its purpose, and is thus not a liberating space.

By these standards, Hattiloo Theatre seems to reach its potential of being a liberating space at first glance: it is a black-owned theatre that exclusively produces black work and uses black actors. But as a nonprofit organization that depends on multiple different factors for its sustainability, it is necessary to look more closely at where it fits into the narrative of resistance through artistic oppression.

First, I will explore the question of its physical space. Hattiloo is located in Overton Square in the Midtown area, across from Playhouse on the Square, one of the three traditional theatres in Memphis. It's also in an area of the city that isn't as affected by high poverty rates as other neighborhoods (cit). Despite its educational programs and community outreach efforts, it is still not fully accessible to all members of the black community in Memphis. But it is also a theatre that depends on patrons and donations in a city where most of the wealth does not belong to the black community; and while the black theatre of the BAM caters only to black audiences, Hattiloo gets support from white community members, too. Justin Matthews spoke of an experience he had performing at Hattiloo: "So I think what Hattiloo, they are attempting to drive a black, black community, but they get lost because at the end of the day…almost every single time I've come to a show or I've done a Hattiloo show there's a predominantly white audience. I remember one show I did, it was an all-white audience and us...it's funny how like words don't become so real to you in the story until something like that happens…at the end of the day we were like, 'They will never understand what we've got, what we're going through and all we are doing right now. It's just entertaining". This is evocative of the BAM's critique of the Harlem Renaissance, and for this reason, it can be dangerous to label Hattiloo a fully liberating space.

In the same vein, Hattiloo has remained the only black repertory theatre in Memphis since its founding twelve years ago; it is the *only physical space* that has represented black dramatic expression since 2006. Conversely, Playhouse on the Square is one out of at least three traditional theatres in the city. In order for Hattiloo to truly liberate the local African-American community, it has to alter the system that perpetuates oppressive conditions, one of which is the lack of established black theatre spaces compared to the amount of spaces reserved by traditional theatres. In 2016, a new Development Center was constructed and now serves as a rehearsal and

outreach office space. Additionally, the Hattiloo Technical Theatre Center was built in the same year to house youth programs that teach about lighting, set, and costume design (Hattiloo, "History"). It is true that they don't occupy the same spot on Cooper Street as the main playhouse theatre, but these spaces are merely expansions of Hattiloo—they are not separate organizations. They do not indicate the growth of black theatre in Memphis in the same way that the appearance of more black repertory theatres would. For if the latter were to occur, then there would be physical validation of Hattiloo's influence on the system in which it operates, a system that undervalues black art.

Although Hattiloo is the only black theatre space in Memphis, there are alternative sites of black theatre work happening in the community. *For Colored Girls*, for instance, was produced by the theatre program here at Rhodes College. As Sarah Brown states, "Darius Wallace does not work for a black repertory theatre, but he supports his family, their home, their food on the table through black stories. And there is a movement in that regard that isn't necessarily tied to black rep" (Brown). Moreover, Bobby Nealson asserts that "if the truth is being told about black folks and their experiences, and it has a liberating effect, it does not have to be told in a black space" (Nealson). So, just as Hattiloo Theatre is not inherently resistant because of its position as the only black repertory theatre, black theatre does not have to take place in a designated place for black performance in order to be considered resistant or liberating.

Furthermore, Hattiloo has also received critique for the subject matter it covers in its seasonal shows—or rather, the subject matter it does not cover. Justin Matthews speaks of his disappointment with Hattiloo for not presenting narratives about the black LGBTQ+ community: "I get really vocal about this because they have such a big platform to be able to cater to a variety

of audiences, not just black audiences, but black LGBT audiences and like audiences outside of that. And my problem is that they're not doing a good job at doing that" (Matthews). He mentions two shows put on by Hattiloo that grappled with the struggle of being apart of the black LGBTQ+ community, one of which he acted in: "That was one of the first times I've ever seen Hattiloo do something like that. And granted it didn't sell out every single night, but it sold seats and it was a beautiful story".

Matthews' testimony brings out the nature of the broader Memphis theatre community and its heavy focus on producing shows that will appeal to the masses; theatre is, after all, not considered mainstream entertainment anymore compared to its popularity with older generations. Eli Williams, when discussing the demographics of the audiences he performed for at Hattiloo, mentioned the lack of younger audience members: "It's very rare, if anytime we see a younger person it's like, oh, no, it's gotta be like somebody that we brought. Um, but you know, of course there are instances where they do come up on their own. But it is rare. It's very rare". He goes on to say that he believes there is a disconnect between the theatre—especially Hattiloo—and millennials: "I know people would much rather go to the movies than go see a play" (Williams). So, there is already pressure to put on well-known, critically acclaimed plays for the sake of sustaining the theatre as an institution. Matthews reiterates this when he says, "with theater in this town, it's a democracy essentially. You're, it's a democracy. It's all about, it's all about what sells. It's all political for me, um, it's all about what sells and what's popular" (Matthews). For Hattiloo, that pressure is applied even more because of its positionality within the theatre community. This is important to remember when evaluating how it operates—or does not operate—as a space of black liberation and resistance.

Even with these critiques, though, Hattiloo nonetheless fosters positive values within its space that cannot be cultivated in traditional theatre spaces. One of those values is internal community. For Sarah Brown, her first time a play with Hattiloo was a moving experience: "…in performance it didn't feel any different. But in the experience of the matter, obviously it was very um, it was just impactful in meaningful way. One, I'd never been around such a diverse cast of actors. I'd never been in a play with that many actors of color—specifically black actors—in my life". She goes on to say that "there was a lot less to explain, a lot of our shared experience didn't even need verbal language. It was very—I don't know what this had to do, or how this really tied in—but it was much more…there was just so much synergy. That may not have anything to do with ethnicity, I don't know. Could've been culture. But there was a warmth, a trust, an honesty" (Brown). This kind of mutual understanding can be hard to reach in traditional theatres with less diverse casts because of both ignorance and unwillingness to address that, but Hattiloo in the very least is able to create a space for organic bonding among black actors that is difficult to find elsewhere.

Additionally, despite its negation of certain narratives about the black community, it does still offer consistent black representation. While traditional theatres in Memphis do showcase black narratives on some occasions, those occasions are often what Matthews calls "token black shows" put on either to satisfy quotas or quench the desire to seem progressive. It is problematic that Hattiloo is not as accessible to a large portion of the local African-American community, but it is nevertheless guaranteed to produce authentic black art for its audiences. And although many of its consumers are older white people, there is still potential for liberation in providing them with black stories. By offering the truth about the black experience, Hattiloo helps to shape and reshape the way in which black people are thought about in the minds of its audiences, the same

way that *for colored girls* altered how Rhodes' predominantly white campus viewed its black female students.

Hattiloo's relationship with black liberation and resistance in Memphis is complicated because of its location, its content, and its accessibility to the black community. But it functions in a similar manner as the three aforementioned moments on the timeline of black artistic protest do: it does as much as it can while still operating within a partial society. The actors of the minstrelsy era, for example, could only resist African-American oppression in subtle ways in order to keep performing. The dramatists of the Harlem Renaissance provided more authentic versions of themselves onstage but dealt with the challenge of receiving white acceptance and the dilemma of staying true to their artistic mission or submitting to white expectations. The Black Arts Movement aimed to rid black artists of that burden but in the process harmed the community by trying so ardently to free themselves from societal artistic values. Hypermasculine and homophobic tendencies, for instance, were propagated through some of the plays produced during the movement in an effort to change the black male identity from the submissive slave to a strong, independent man.

So, as the only black repertory theatre in the region, Hattiloo would appear to be inherently liberating and resistant, especially for the black community in Memphis. But the timeline of black artistic protest does not have an end because the fight has not stopped. Hattiloo's complexity reflects how much America values not only theatre as an artform, but black theatre, as well as black life specifically. And to this day, Eurocentric, westernized art is prioritized above all else. Hattiloo has been forced to compromise its role as a liberating space for the sake of sustaining itself while existing under oppressive conditions. The work it has done together with the work of its artists is substantial, and *that* is what ultimately makes it a space of

resistance; but there is more to be done, which implicates how much more must be done on a larger scale for Africans-Americans to be *truly* liberated from systematic oppression and institutional racism.

*Names of interviewees have been changed

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