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Kate Dossett

“Black Theatre Archives and the Making of a Black Dramatic Tradition.”

In a 1979 interview, Amiri Baraka made explicit the connections between the wealth of African American dramatic literature still waiting to be recovered from the Federal Theatre Archive and the broader suppression of histories of radical activism in the 1930s: “there may be thirty plays by black writers alone that have never been produced. ... All of that material from the Federal Theatre is just waiting to be surfaced..... when you get to the thirties in this country, history—white and black—goes into a tunnel. You don’t know what happens -that period just doesn’t exist.”¹ Baraka had encountered forgotten black theatre manuscripts on a visit to the new Center for the Federal Theatre Project at George Mason University (GMU), where the playscripts and administrative records of the New Deal theatre project, recovered from a Baltimore hangar in 1974, had recently had been restored. Calling for black directors to revive these important works, Baraka’s intervention highlights the role played by the Black Arts Movement in writing the history of black cultural production in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) was one of four relief projects for unemployed artists established in 1935 as part of the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration (WPA). Alongside the Federal Art Project (FAP) for visual artists, Federal Music Project (FMP) for musicians, and Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) for writers, the FTP was tasked with putting unemployed cultural laborers back to work and encouraging creativity in the arts. Between 1935 and 1939 the project established a range of drama units in towns and cities across the United States. These included seventeen ‘Negro Units.’ In theory, Negro Units could be established wherever there were sufficient numbers of unemployed black theatre professionals eligible to claim relief. In practice, Negro Units were usually set up where there was already a history of interracial collaboration between white producers and black theatre professionals. Negro Units in Harlem, Hartford, Newark, Boston, Chicago, and Seattle developed new dramas and maintained a regular production schedule through the four years of the project’s operation. Programming for Negro Units was a source of contention on the FTP. All dramas had to be cleared by the National Service Bureau headquartered in New York, while six regional production boards approved the programs of individual units under their jurisdiction. Even so, individual Negro Unit directors and

supervisors had considerable control over what would be staged. Of the Negro Units, only Boston had a black director—Ralf Coleman—for the full four years of the project. However, as the project progressed, African Americans would take on formal and informal leadership roles especially in the Harlem, Seattle, Chicago and Hartford Negro Units. It was in these four Negro Units that radical new black dramas were developed and staged before integrated audiences during the FTP. Employing significant numbers of African Americans as actors, technicians, directors, dramatists, and administrators, these units were, relatively speaking, well-documented, and many of their playscripts and production materials were preserved in the official federal theatre archive.²

The archive of the Federal Theatre, as well as theatre anthologies and histories of the 1930s give the impression that playwriting was a man's job. Fewer than twenty percent of dramas staged by the project were written by women, and few women of color were given opportunities to develop new work.³ Shirley Graham Du Bois worked as a supervisor on the Chicago Negro Unit while the actor Rose McClendon had been an important leader of the Harlem Unit before her untimely death. Katherine Dunham, pioneer of modern dance, developed several new dance pieces and Zora Neale Hurston worked briefly as a drama coach for the FTP but the project did not stage any of her dramatic works. Yet, as I argue elsewhere, black women were central to the making of black theatre on the Federal Theatre Project, creating and developing collaborative theatre manuscripts as part of what I call "Black performance communities." Such communities used the resources of, but importantly operated beyond the white-controlled Negro Units of the Federal Theatre. While women were at the heart of black performance communities, they rarely received credit for their work either at the time or in later accounts of the project. For histories and archives of dramatic literature tend to foreground the creative genius of individual playwrights in ways that reinscribe men as creators of culture at the expense of women.⁴

Federal Theatre Archives at GMU, the Library of Congress and the National Archives hold a wealth of black theatre manuscripts developed on the Federal Theatre Project. The vast majority are attributed to individual male playwrights. They include new dramas of black history, urban life, and radical black activism as well as black authored folk dramas. The most well-known black dramas from the FTP are Theodore Browne's *Natural Man*, (1937) staged by the Seattle Negro Unit in 1937, Abram Hill and John Silvera's *Living Newspaper Liberty Deferred* (1937-8) which was never produced by the FTP, and Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog*, staged by the Chicago Negro Unit in 1938. Of these, the best-known and most-revived is *Big White Fog*. It was staged in 1940 by the

Negro Playwrights Company, a short-lived theatre collective in Harlem led by federal theatre dramatists including Hill, Ward, and Hughes Allison; in 1995 it underwent a major revival under the direction of Penumbra's Lou Bellamy at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis-St. Paul; in 2007, it received its international debut at London's Almeida Theatre.⁵ The revival of black federal theatre dramas in major new productions by professional and community theatres was made possible by their inclusion, for the first time, in black theatre anthologies. Beginning in the 1970s, the publication of selected black federal theatre dramas breathed new life into these forty-year-old plays, ensuring they were studied and workshopped on college campuses during the early Black Studies movement.⁶

While many of the dramas developed on the Federal Theatre Project took black perspectives, values, and heritage as their starting point, the plays preserved in anthologies and revived for production were those categorized as dramas of social protest. By contrast, black-authored folk dramas developed and staged by the FTP remain unavailable or liminal to theatre history. The dramas of H. Jack Bates, Warren Coleman, Ralf Coleman, Lew Payton, Joseph Staton, Morrison Wood, P. Washington Porter, and Joseph Christmas are still unpublished, available only in archives or presumed lost. More insidious, however, is the fact that black-authored folk dramas of the Federal Theatre are usually categorized alongside white-authored folk dramas of the same period and framed as derivative of and accommodating to the racial stereotypes that underpinned white-directed black performance during and after slavery.⁷ The roles available to black Americans in white 'folk' dramas were not substantially different to the parts made popular by white performers of blackface minstrelsy in the 1840s: childlike and lazy, unrestrained and irresponsible. Such roles signified whites' power to command black Americans in a spectacle of contented subjection beyond legal emancipation.⁸ Those 'Negro' folk dramas considered significant in the 1920 and 1930s were ones in which white authority and black subjection are front and center; invariably they are authored by white men such as Paul Green, Ridgely Torrence, and a band of considerably less talented white dramatists.⁹

The folk dramas of Green and other white dramatists are more than carefully preserved relics of how whites imagined black folk. For while their racial politics make them unlikely vehicles for production in the twenty-first century, they were regularly anthologized from the 1920s through the 1960s, and remain in print, continuing to define what we understand by folk drama and inform histories of the Federal Theatre.¹⁰ By contrast, black-authored folk dramas written for or staged by the Federal Theatre have had little impact on histories of the FTP or black dramatic literature in the 1930s.¹¹ Their

absence documents the processes and politics of twentieth-century knowledge production which consigns certain types of dramas to the margins and elevates others to a place of recognition. Bringing neglected black-authored folk dramas into dialogue with published black federal theatre dramas, as well as with white-authored 'Negro' folk dramas, is essential if we are to appreciate what was distinctive about 1930s black dramatic literature and if we are to understand black drama in relation to its own traditions. Almost forty years after Baraka complained that "Black theatre history is always told in terms of its relationship to antithetical forms," it is time we considered the black folk drama of the FTP in relation to other black-authored FTP dramas as well as the black dramatic tradition constructed in the twentieth century.¹²

In order to do this, I examine how and why black dramatists were forgotten before mapping the roles of Black Arts Movement artists and the restoration of federal theatre archives in the recovery of black FTP dramas. I also consider the range of black federal theatre dramas still waiting to be surfaced in the twenty-first century. Finally, I examine two neglected black folk dramas: *Did Adam Sin?* and *Cinda* staged by the FTP alongside the better known social protest drama, *Big White Fog*. Considering these dramas together allows us to see how black playwrights and Negro Units dramatized the Depression as it unfolded. It also roots the black family drama within a longer black dramatic tradition. Rather than see August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle plays as stretching back to a tradition beginning with Richard Wright's collaboration with Paul Green on the stage play of *Native Son* (1941) or Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* (1959), sourcing contemporary black drama to the black federal theatre of the 1930s suggests that the staging of contemporary gender roles and race relations has a much longer and richer theatre history.

Tradition Making: Black Arts Movement, Federal Theatre Archives and Anthologies:

It is impossible to teach Afro-American literature correctly if you don't know about Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog*."

-Amiri Baraka¹³

Knowledge production about black culture in the first half of the twentieth century is strongly influenced by the Black Arts Movement (1965-1975/6), a movement whose own history has undergone significant revision.¹⁴ The 1930s is no exception: theatre artists of the Black Arts Movement shaped the legacy of black federal theatre drama in complex

ways, obscuring certain works and artists while breathing new life into others. Often, and especially early on, Black Arts theatre artists rejected the inheritance of predecessors working within patronage systems controlled by and producing art for white Americans in the 1920s and 1930s. In what James Smethurst has labeled “gestures of generational disaffiliation,” Black Arts manifestoes of the late 1960s both underplay and signpost the many connections to their literary antecedents.¹⁵ Frequently spokespersons represent themselves as the first generation to attempt revolutionary black theatre: in Baraka’s “The Myth of a Negro Literature” (1963), Larry Neal’s essay in the Black Arts edition of *The Drama Review* (1968), and in Addison Gayle’s *The Way of the New World*, (1975), black literature written during the first half of the twentieth century is presented as inauthentic, mediocre and middle class.¹⁶

Yet as the Black Arts Movement developed, the necessity of uncovering a long-neglected black heritage fostered greater exploration of and engagement with a black revolutionary tradition that extended back to slavery.¹⁷ In essays, interviews, and poetry, Baraka was at the center of this new iteration of black tradition making. His 1979 essay, “The Revolutionary Tradition in Afro American Literature,” began with the slave narrative and encompassed the ‘pre Civil War nationalists’ the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement and beyond. Within this tradition, Baraka singled out Theodore Ward’s *Big White Fog* as “one of the finest plays written in this country.”¹⁸ In an interview about the same time Baraka lamented the “obscurity” that had been “heaped” on the neglected dramatist and considered how the politics of the archive and the academy had worked to obscure particular works by black authors. “It’s fantastic,” he remarked, “how certain works fade into obscurity when the powers-that-be don’t like their content. They can simply dismiss them.”¹⁹ Baraka sought to correct this in his own work. In his 1981 poem “In the Tradition,” which he performed with jazz instrumentalists David Murray and Steve McCall, Baraka addressed tradition making head-on:

... Tradition of

For My People Margaret Walker & David Walker & Jr. Walker
& Walker Smith Sweet Ray Leonard Rockin in Rhythm w/Musical Dukes
What is this tradition **Basied** on, we blue Black Wards strugglin
against a Big White Fog, Africa people, our fingerprints are everywhere
on you america.²⁰

Commented [KP1]: “Based” or add [sic]

Commented [k2]: It is Basied. Is it conventional to correct or insert [sic] into poems? I notice that authors who work on Baraka and cite his poems to do not.

Baraka's enthusiastic promotion of Ted Ward in the late 1970s was facilitated by the restored Federal Theatre archive at GMU. Visiting the collection in 1979, Baraka was fascinated by what he saw: "There's a play by Langston, one by Hughes Allison who was a local playwright called *The Trial of Dr. Beck*. They have another play of his at George Mason University; it's a long historical pageant that he wanted to put on.... All that material from the Federal theatre is just waiting to be surfaced."²¹ The process of recovering the archive was begun in 1974 when Lorraine Brown, a GMU professor, discovered the Federal Theatre records. When the FTP was closed prematurely in 1939—an early hostage to the hostile political climate in which Congressional opponents used the new House on Un-American Activities Committee to attack the New Deal—the most significant portions of the archive were divided between the Library of Congress and National Archives. A series of cataloging projects were begun but never completed. In 1964, the Library of Congress decided to move the collection to a remote location east of Baltimore.²² In the second half of the 1960s, the formative years of the Black Arts Movement, the archive of federal theatre drama was hidden from view.

Brown and her colleagues secured a loan of the collection from the Library of Congress and restored and cataloged the FTP archive at GMU.²³ A decade-long oral history and collection program expanded and reenergized the archive. Importantly, the GMU project paid particular attention to the Negro Units and conducted numerous oral history interviews with African American actors, directors, composers, stage technicians, and playwrights.²⁴ Veterans of the FTP, long wary of sending materials to the official archive in the wake of the contentious shut down of the project in 1939, began to donate theatre manuscripts and personal papers to GMU, as well as to regional public and University Libraries. For example, the dramatist Theodore Browne donated portions of his personal collection, including federal theatre manuscripts, to the collection.²⁵ The recovery of missing manuscripts enabled the first revivals of Browne's work since the 1930s: Shaw University staged a production and workshop on *Natural Man* in 1986, while another version was staged in 2003 at Stanford University.²⁶ Browne's slow resurfacing, however, was overshadowed by the remarkable recovery of fellow FTP dramatist Theodore Ward.

Theodore Ward was probably the most revered and thus revived black dramatist during the Black Arts Movement. A number of his post federal theatre dramas, including *Candle in the Wind* (1966) and *Daubers* (1953) were first staged in the 1970s. The most frequently revived was *Our Lan* (1941). Set after the Civil War, it traced the struggle of

formerly enslaved African Americans on the Georgia coast who fought to hold onto their 40 acres of land promised by the federal government.²⁷ By contrast, Ward's federal theatre drama *Big White Fog*, which explored gender and racial hierarchies in black nationalist and communist movements of the 1930s, and was first published in 1974, was not revived until 1995. Baraka believed it was the political message of Ward's work that made theatre producers reluctant to stage Ward's federal theatre drama in the 1970s: "Some people don't want to be identified with Marxism," he explained, "Rather than denounce the play for its political content, they will conjure up art reasons why they don't like it. But it's the content in the main."²⁸ Baraka helped create the framework for what might, and might not, be recovered, but he was not alone. These parameters were also significantly influenced by publication in 1974 of the landmark anthology, *Black Theater U.S.A.: 1847-1974*.

It speaks to the significance of the Black Arts Movement for black theatre history that Ward was not only the most revived black dramatist of the Black Arts Movement but also the most published black playwright of the Federal Theatre in the 1970s. The publication of black theatre manuscripts represents a significant achievement of the Black Arts Movement. The first black theatre anthologies to emerge in the 1970s showcased contemporary dramas by black theatre artists determined to preserve their own radical legacy.²⁹ In 1974, the Free Press published a black theatre anthology that sought to document the history and evolution of black dramaturgy in America since the mid-nineteenth century. Edited by theatre professor James Hatch with playwright Ted Shine as a consultant, *Black Theater U.S.A.*, was the first theatre anthology to select black-authored dramas originating in the Federal Theatre. This first edition included Browne's *Natural Man* (1937) and Ward's *Big White Fog* (1938).³⁰ In 1996, Hatch and Shine published a new edition in two volumes. The revised anthology was updated and expanded to include an excerpt from a third black federal theatre drama: Abram Hill and John Silvera's *Liberty Deferred*, a non-realist parody of the FTP's documentary dramas of current affairs. This innovative black Living Newspaper, brought to light by researchers on the archive recovery project at GMU, was first published in full by GMU Press in 1989.³¹

The significance of the recovery work undertaken at GMU and the publication of *Black Theater U.S.A* for the study of black dramas cannot be overstated. Before *Black Theater U.S.A.*, African American literary history and the concerns of historical black theatre communities were seldom represented in anthologies. For example, in 1969, black drama was represented in *Fifty Best Plays of the American Theater* by white fantasies of black life: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Green Pastures* and *Porgy*.³² The first and second editions of *Black*

Theater U.S.A have done much to shape our understanding of and access to a black dramatic tradition: for they published together, and often for the first time, dramas of black family life and social protest plays, comedies and biographical dramas; plays of black history and dramas by women. The inclusion of three black federal theatre dramatists within the anthology has raised the profile of their work: the published black federal theatre dramas are studied on university courses and have inspired new scholarship and productions in the U.S. and the U.K. As Baraka notes, he used the first edition “in many of my classes through the years and still instantly recommend it for Black lit and drama courses.”³³

Anthologies of black drama frame not just which dramas we study and stage, but how we view certain periods as producing particular kinds of dramas. The first edition of *Black Theater U.S.A.* is organized both chronologically and thematically in ways that assign certain forms of dramas to particular decades. Folk plays are consigned to one decade: “Black Folk Plays of the 1920s,” while another section groups together dramas of different genres “From the Depression”: these are Owen Dodson’s *Divine Comedy*, (1938) a poetic drama inspired by the charismatic religious leader Father Divine; *Don’t You Want to be Free* (1937), Langston Hughes’s popular agitprop musical sketch which features some of the author’s earlier poems; Harry Edward’s one-act social document *Job Hunters* (1931), and Ward’s *Big White Fog* (1938). The other federal theatre drama in the anthology, Browne’s *Natural Man*, is categorized not as a folk drama or a Depression play, but rather under “Plays of Black History” which date between 1929 and 1937. A further category, “Social Protest of the 1940s” places federal theatre dramatist Abram Hill (alongside Richard Wright) in a different tradition and decade from the cultural production and debates of the 1930s. This distance between federal theatre dramatists is reinforced in the revised and expanded edition published in 1996. In the two-volume edition, Hill and Wright are placed in *Volume 2: The Recent Period 1935 to Today*, while Federal Theatre dramas are confined to Volume 1 and represented by *Liberty Deferred*, *Big White Fog* and *Natural Man*. In the revised edition, *Natural Man* is now categorized as “Legend and History” alongside *Liberty Deferred*, while *Big White Fog* is labeled “From the Depression.”³⁴ The chronological overlap between the end of volume one (1847-1938) and the start of volume two (1935 to today) signifies the difficulties in marking out the 1930s as a period. These difficulties speak to the larger concerns of periodization and canonization enacted in the process of anthologizing. In the foreword to Volume 2, Amiri Baraka questions but is not able to resolve the arbitrary boundaries erected by anthologies. Thus the anthology does not attend to the questions raised

in Baraka's preamble: "why there were not more of the Federal Theatre Project plays" included alongside Hughes's and Wright's social protest plays?³⁵

Gene Jarrett has argued that "Anthologies... are one of the most revealing markers of ideological turns in the history of literary scholarship."³⁶ What they reveal are the boundaries constructed by editors, publishers, scholars, and others to give meaning to contemporary concerns. Anthologies reflect the moment of their making. They are, as Jarrett argues, part of a broader process of knowledge production in which certain texts are judged legitimate while others are marked anomalous. Imaginary boundaries are organized around what a text says, how it says it, and often both. Those texts judged anomalous "threaten taxonomies because they contest the very principle used to classify and value texts."³⁷ Jarrett's idea of an anomalous text is useful in understanding how certain dramatic forms have been legitimized and others rendered insignificant and inauthentic by publication or exclusion from black theatre anthologies. Looking for and at 'anomalous' black folk dramas of the federal theatre drama alongside exemplary 'social protest' dramas helps us read both in new ways.

Still Waiting to Be Surfaced: Black federal theatre dramas:

There are a significant number of unpublished black-authored or co-authored federal theatre dramas available in federal theatre collections at GMU and the Library of Congress. These include a number of folk dramas written by H. Jack Bates, resident playwright on the Boston Negro project.³⁸ *Cinda*, *Streets of Gold*, and *Genesis*, a drama Bates co-authored with white dramatist Charles Flato, were all staged by the Boston Negro project. The project also developed black folk dramas by Warren Coleman and his brother, Ralf Coleman, director of the Boston Negro Unit. Although these dramas are often presumed missing, federal theatre manuscripts for some of their works are available.³⁹ In addition to black folk dramas, other black-devised or authored manuscripts available in the federal theatre archives but not yet published include adaptations of white classics and musical reviews. Manuscripts of Theodore Browne's adaptation of *Lysistrata*—"An African version" as well as Joseph Staton and Herman Moore's adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* for the Seattle Negro Unit, document black creativity and agency in shaping manuscripts and productions in Negro Units. However, manuscripts of musical reviews, which were staged by nearly every Negro unit of the Federal Theatre from Seattle to Harlem, Chicago to Raleigh at some point during the four years of the project, are rarely preserved in federal theatre archives. Actors on Negro Units devised and participated in numerous revues including *Swing*, *Gates Swing* (Seattle),

Carlton Moss's musical documentary *Prelude in Swing* (Harlem), Ralf Coleman's *Swanee Review* and *Swan Song* (Boston), and Joseph Christmas's *The Rhythm Parade* (Raleigh, North Carolina).⁴⁰

The difficulty of establishing black authorship of dramas devised and staged by the Federal Theatre is compounded by the fact that theatre manuscripts were sometimes developed by black troupes in Negro Units in collaboration with white dramatists. The products of such collaborations were frequently credited to white authors. For example, the black Living Newspaper *Stars and Bars* was a collaboration between the black troupe of the Hartford Negro Unit and the young white playwright Ward Courtney. Even though the contribution of African Americans to the newspaper is recorded in the manuscript, the drama has been attributed by scholars to the white dramatist in ways that obscure black creativity as well as the collaborative process of writing a Living Newspaper.⁴¹

Furthermore, whether a black manuscript was or was not preserved appears to reflect the relative strength of black theatre communities in different regions and thus the type of FTP unit established. In order to start a professional Federal Theatre Unit, WPA regulations required ninety percent of expenditure to be allocated to the wages of those eligible for relief. This meant that most FTP units were established in areas such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other cultural hubs where there were sufficient numbers of registered unemployed theatre professionals. In addition to privileging those areas with a density of theatre professionals, the FTP served, like many other New Deal programs, to reinscribe the racial apparatus of the South. The idea of African Americans receiving relief wages for play-acting was unconscionable to many white Southerners. Of the 17 professional Negro Units, only two were in the South: the Birmingham Negro Unit staged five productions and the Atlanta Negro Unit just one; neither survived beyond the end of 1936.⁴² The records of both Units are patchy in comparison to the longer-lived and larger Negro Units in Seattle, Chicago, Boston, Harlem, and Hartford.

Although work relief rules made it difficult to establish professional units in many parts of the country, a provision in WPA regulations allowed for community theatre units to be set up as leisure activities and provided funds to pay an eligible theatre worker to coach and supervise community theatres. In spite of the sparse documentation, scholars including Cecelia Moore have been able to get some insight into the diversity of plays put on by community Negro Units which outlasted the professional Negro Units in the South.⁴³ In Raleigh, African American educator Joseph Christmas led the Negro Unit as well as writing and staging a number of original dramas. These included *The Real Thing*, a drama set in

Raleigh focused on the “happenings and worship of a modern [black] family during the rush of Christmas season,” an Easter pageant called *It is Finished*, and *Rhythm Parade*, a new musical comedy which, according to one black newspaper, combined “unusual interpretation of blues and dances, including an African Balines [sic] Legong with light drama.”⁴⁴

Christmas also staged dramatic readings of the dialect poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar as well as *They Live On*, a “Negro folk opera” which he adapted from the work of Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson.⁴⁵ The paucity of records and manuscripts makes it difficult to get a clear picture of these dramatic works. If they do not sound like the social protest dramas anthologized in *Black Theatre U.S.A.*, they nevertheless drew on black sources and explored Negro folk heritage as well as the religion and music of the modern black family.

This brief overview of black federal theatre manuscripts reveals the extent to which black creatives seized opportunities to develop new dramas by drawing on the material and personnel resources of the FTP. It also highlights the multiple and intersecting factors that shape what is preserved in federal theatre archives. Because some of these manuscripts are still unaccounted for, it is difficult to categorize definitively what has been saved or lost. But if legitimate texts—*Big White Fog*, *Natural Man* and *Liberty Deferred*—focused on the urban, the impact of industrialization, the Great Migration, and social protest movements of the early twentieth century, then unpublished black federal theatre dramas more often engaged with the idea of the folk. Written in dialect, set in black communities, these dramas center black customs and heritage and use comedy and indirection to critique American racial hierarchies. Understanding the range and diversity of black-authored dramas developed during the FTP challenges presumptions about periodization and the thematic organization of black theatre anthologies originating in the 1970s, reminding us that black folk dramas were an important vehicle for a variety of black expression in the 1930s.

Making Folk Real in the Depression

Histories of African American literature view the 1930s as marking a significant shift in style and content. Whereas the 1920s is often associated with folk drama in a variety of forms—from the twenty or so one-act folk dramas of Willis Richardson to the experimental, expressionist folk dramas of Marita Bonner and Jean Toomer—realism has come to define the Depression years.⁴⁶ However, in the 1930s, folk and realism often combined to present the ‘real’ America to itself. Writing in 1934, Alain Locke, the most vocal advocate of the folk as inspiration for black drama during the Harlem Renaissance, reasoned that black artists should now look to

“enlightened realism,” because it could “painfully reconstruct from actual life, truer, livelier, more representative presentations of the folk.”⁴⁷ In *Real Folk* (2011) Sonnet Retman argues that the search for folk authenticity took on a renewed urgency in the context of the Depression, spawning hybrid forms that “told a different kind of story about the folk in the most uncertain of times.”⁴⁸ However black cultural producers searching for new forms to represent the pain and truth of black life had to navigate a flourishing white ‘Negro folk’ industry.

White-authored ‘folk’ dramas were regarded as the dominant force in ‘serious’ black theatre in the 1920s. Paul Green, Eugene O’Neill, and Ridgely Torrence were part of a white triumvirate whose “pioneering genius” was affirmed by Locke and Montgomery Gregory when they selected eight of the white playwrights’ one-act “Negro” plays for their 1927 anthology *Plays of Negro Life*.⁴⁹ In the same year, Green was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for what would become one of his most performed plays, *In Abraham’s Bosom*. A drama of a mixed-race man’s doomed attempts to lift himself and his people from ignorance and poverty in the aftermath of slavery, Green’s hero, like the “tragic mulattos” of nineteenth century fiction was unable to escape the self-destruction ordained for those of “Negro” blood.⁵⁰ Green’s reputation as an authority on black life was given no small boost by the Federal Theatre. He was the most frequently produced contemporary white playwright of “Negro” drama on the FTP. Between 1935 and 1939 the Federal Theatre staged seventeen productions of Green’s work between Chicago, Boston, New York, Hartford, New Orleans, Jacksonville, Wilson and Manteo, North Carolina, and Seattle.⁵¹ Green’s central position as the white dramatist of black life in the Federal Theatre was helped by his close association with the FTP’s national director Hallie Flanagan. Her esteem for Green is captured in her 1940 account of the FTP in which she placed him alongside Shakespeare, Aristotle, and O’Neill as one of the most important dramatists to appear on the federal stage.⁵²

If the white administrators and theatre practitioners who ran Negro Units and authorized plays for production remained wedded to Green’s notion of the folk, they did so under no illusion as to how black troupes felt about performing white-authored ‘folk’ plays of black life. Blanding Sloan, director for the Eastern Region, admitted it was “difficult to sell negro groups in federal theatre on doing folk stuff. The words ‘darkies’ ‘coon’ and ‘nigger’ are objectionable to the negro race almost regardless of how used.”⁵³ Mid-West regional director Thomas Wood Stevens wrote to Hallie Flanagan that “The Negro Theatre has been in “hot water” ever since it started because of the factional battles of the negro community. There is a very strong feeling there against anything in the way of a Negro folk play.”⁵⁴ Yet members of Negro Units did not always share the same definition of what constituted a folk drama. When Richard Wright

worked as a publicity agent for the Chicago Negro Unit in 1936 he attempted to get the black troupe to perform Paul Green's 1935 chain-gang drama *Hymn to the Rising Sun*. Working under a white director, the recalcitrant troupe insisted they did not recognize the defeatism which pervaded white men's idea of the 'folk' and refused to play roles which put black men in shackles, even on the stage. Recalling the encounter in his 1945 memoir, *Black Boy*, Wright articulated his frustration with the troupe. They had failed, he suggested, to distinguish the minstrel stereotypes of older folk dramas from Green's realist depiction of southern black folk:

I could not believe my ears. I had assumed that the heart of the Negro actor was pining for adult expression in the American theatre, that he was ashamed of the stereotypes of clowns, mammies, razors, dice, watermelon, and cotton fields...Now they were protesting against dramatic realism!⁵⁵

Wright's juxtaposition of Green's 'realism' with 'folk' stereotypes promotes a false binary, one which deflects attention from the power of white dramatists to choose and define the forms that best represented authentic blackness. Whether in folk or realist dramas or realist plays about black folk, it was precisely the white dramatist's control of the dramatic representation of black experiences that was up for negotiation in the Negro Units of the Federal Theatre.

Federal Theatre records suggest that black actors frequently resisted playing what they saw as unheroic, humiliating roles, created by white men. More often than not, these roles were presented in white-authored folk dramas whose reality was contested by black actors and audiences. When black actors did take on such roles, they found ways to navigate problematic dramas to reflect their own values and interpretations. In Durham, North Carolina, African American director of the FTP sponsored Negro Theatre, Robert Griffin reported on the black troupe's reluctance to take on "Negro plays by white authors":

Their argument is that the average white playwright in dealing with Negro characters usually writes for a white audience and as such certain preconceived notions concerning the Negroes are only intensified.⁵⁶

These preconceptions included the stereotypes so frequently associated with white folk dramas, characters "whose favourite pastime is razor slinging and crap throwing; whose gastronomic delight is chitterlings...and whose dramatic ability reaches its zenith with the insane antics of Stepin Fetchit."⁵⁷ In a tone half admiration, half complaint, Griffin

acknowledged that players in the Durham Negro Theatre resisted direction and insisted on interpreting white-authored black roles in ways that were “interesting, amusing, gratifying, astonishing and, at times, blasphemous.” He named Paul Green as one of those white dramatists whose ‘Negro’ roles were subject to blasphemous distortion.⁵⁸

If some units refused to stage particular plays or insisted on their own characterization of roles written by white dramatists, others refused the props which signaled black disempowerment on the American stage. When the Federal Theatre decided to stage a production of Frank B. Wells’s *John Henry* in the autumn of 1936, there was considerable resistance to the white dramatist’s portrayal of the black folk hero. Initially scheduled for production by the New Jersey Negro Unit, it was postponed on account of “local objections to some of its scenes.”⁵⁹ The reports of the FTP play reading department, which reviewed and approved plays for production, offer clues as to what these objections may have been. C. C. Lawrence, one of the very few black play readers employed by the FTP, compared the drama with his own knowledge of the folk hero. Working on the railroads and construction gangs of the South, Lawrence had “heard the saga of ‘John Henry’ told around many campfires and in many shantys, after the day’s work was through. To these people John Henry, was hero, a giant in strength [sic] and the friend of the downtrodden.”⁶⁰ By contrast, the white newspaperman “takes a legendary heroic folk character of a people and distorts him into a villainous, murderous cutthroat.”⁶¹ In Wells’s version set in 1851, John Henry is cast as a slave rather than an icon of resistance to Jim Crow. From Big Boy to Granny Lou to John Henry’s promiscuous wife, Wells’s script was an exemplary case of how white dramatists constructed the Negro folk drama in the 1930s. But the production is also illustrative of how black actors refused to embody the roles they were given. When the Los Angeles Negro Unit staged *John Henry*, the black troupe altered their costumes. Black actors cast as miners were supposed to be stripped to the waist while the chorus was to wear “old undershirts, not too clean, or old, soiled, and sleeveless vests.” However, according to the frustrated director, cast members changed their clothes after opening night, and performed instead in “garments that they themselves wished to wear.”⁶²

Did Adam Sin?, Big White Fog, and the Chicago Negro Unit

The FTP production archive not only documents black troupes’ adaption, appropriation, and reinterpretation of white folk dramas; it also records how some black theatre communities took themes from white-authored texts to produce new dramas. Black folk dramas are not usually

part of the story of the FTP, yet most Negro Unit troupes staged both white and black-authored folk dramas during the four years of the project. Black-authored folk dramas developed on the FTP remain obscure compared to the better-known dramas of social protest. Condemned by association with white folk dramas of the period, the little consideration they have attracted has deemed them accommodationist.⁶³ The early productions of the Chicago Negro Unit suggest however that black-authored folk plays were not simply responding to the white tradition of “folk” dramas: they were in dialogue with black-authored social protest dramas of the Federal Theatre. Black folk dramas provided a useful vehicle to explore the relationship between white conventions for representing black lives on the one hand and the black folk tradition and new dramatic forms that placed black experiences and values at their center on the other.

The Chicago Negro Unit’s famous offspring have come to define the history of black federal theatre in the Windy City. The Negro Unit is often briefly mentioned in the studies of Richard Wright to explain his departure from Chicago, the city he cast as a cultural backwater following the aborted attempt to stage Paul Green’s *Hymn to the Rising Sun*.⁶⁴ Likewise, studies of the unit have focused on the two dramas that attracted big headlines and audiences: Ted Ward’s *Big White Fog*, staged in 1938, and the enormously successful swing version of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Mikado*. Initiated in Chicago by the composer and Negro Unit project supervisor Shirley Graham, it transferred to New York in 1939 and inspired a copycat version on Broadway.⁶⁵ However the Chicago Negro Unit staged other black-devised and authored dramas that help us understand the better-known black dramas that emerged from the Unit; they are significant, too, in their own right.

Did Adam Sin? opened on April 30, 1936, a few weeks after the Unit had launched with *Romey and Julie*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s play set in Harlem. Only the second production to be staged by the Chicago Negro Unit, it was a black folk drama written and directed by African American theatre veteran Lew Payton.⁶⁶ It has much in common with Ward’s *Big White Fog*. Both are set during the Depression in a black neighborhood of a major city. But while *Big White Fog* is subtitled a “Negro tragedy,” *Did Adam Sin?* is a “Negro comedy”; where *Fog* had a white director, Payton directed himself. The fate of the two plays and the extent to which they have shaped our understanding of the Chicago Negro Unit differ greatly. This difference corresponds to their availability as manuscripts: while there are multiple manuscripts of Ward’s drama in Federal Theatre archives, there is no federal theatre manuscript of Payton’s play. The manuscript owes its survival to the fact that in 1937, Payton self-published it alongside a number of other dramas and sketches in a

collection entitled *Did Adam Sin?: And Other Stories of Negro Life in Comedy-Drama and Sketches*.⁶⁷

The published version and the playbill both describe Payton's play as a "comedy-drama." Set in a Depression-era Harlem apartment, the drama's characters include: 'Pa,' who lives with his wife and three of his four children. These include the quick-tempered Booker, and Adam, his teenage son who suffered brain injuries after he was hit by a car. His sweet-natured daughter Clara also lives in and looks after the home. Clara's admirer is the Deacon, a regular visitor to the apartment, who cites scripture and eats heartily. The sole wage-earner is the children's mother, Ma, who works long hours cleaning to put food on the table. The oldest daughter, Maybelle, has moved out of the family home and in with Dan, a womanizing, gambling man. This fast-paced three-act drama revolves around the relationship between Maybelle and the rest of her family. Living on the ill-gotten earnings of Dan, Maybelle has plenty to eat, new clothes to wear, and a talent for throwing lavish parties. By contrast, the rest of her family struggles to make ends meet. The climax of the drama occurs when these two worlds collide. Maybelle invites her younger sister to a party in order to fix her up with a man. But the man who pursues Clara with unwanted kisses, is Dan. He pays for his transgression with a bullet through the head. There is a strong implication that one of Maybelle's brothers is the killer. Booker, the elder brother, is immediately arrested even though his mentally-impaired younger brother Adam insists he killed Dan. The audience is left wondering, did Adam sin?

With singing, dancing, and humor prominent in the manuscript, Payton's play seems to provide just what audiences had come to expect from a black 'comedy-drama': the play opens to the backdrop of a prayer meeting with noisy spirituals; half-way through the action stops for a fifteen-minute show as singers and dancers perform a routine for the guests at Maybelle's party, and religious authorities are invoked and gently mocked.⁶⁸ The characters appear straight from white folk drama central casting: the gun-toting, unemployed black man, the hard-working mother, the self-serving pastor, and the fast and loose black woman. Yet *Did Adam Sin?* also dramatizes the hardships of the 1930s in ways which reflect the social realism often associated with Depression-era literature. In particular, the play explores how African American men's inability to find meaningful employment shapes gender roles and relationships within black families, a dramatic theme that will return in the mid-twentieth century's most well-known black drama, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Men attempt, unsuccessfully, to assert their authority, but it is women who take responsibility. When the Deacon wants permission to court Clara, he turns to Ma: "you is head of the house. I thought I'd better

speak to you first.”⁶⁹ Importantly it is the women who articulate and explain the power of race to disable and disqualify men from employment. Clara defends her younger brother, who has been advised not to work by the doctor on account of his injuries “‘Cause his head ain’t never been right since that automobile hit him last Summer.” Likewise, she explains her father’s idleness: “Pa is old and they ain’t hiring old men these days and times.”⁷⁰ Maybelle has a slightly different take on it, introducing her father to her boyfriend: “This is Pa—he started with the depression and been with it ever since.”⁷¹

The significance of *Did Adam Sin?* appearing on the federal theatre stage and its place within a broader dramatic tradition was not lost on the Chicago Negro Unit in 1936. The playbill included a mission statement written by the unit’s African American publicity officer, Henry B. Sweet, who acknowledged the complex tradition within which the drama sat:

Project Number Three continues with this, its second production, to give a further insight into the great amount of dramatic material to be found in the folklore of certain types of the Negro group. These particular types are selected not that they exemplify the epitome of Negro culture, but that they exemplify something that is distinctive in American life.⁷²

This rare inclusion of an explanatory note on a federal theatre program is significant: it seems to suggest that the folk—whether dramatized by black or white Americans—is not the sum of black culture. Rather it suggests that the folklore tradition represents something significant within American culture, something that black theatre artists were also entitled to explore. The Chicago Negro Unit was not the first or only black theatre troupe to produce black-authored folk dramas. Yet this very public defense suggests that to do so before integrated audiences on the federal stage required explanation. Keen to dissociate with race essentialism reinscribed by white Negro folk dramas such as Green’s *Hymn to the Rising Sun*, the program note also recognizes the risk and rewards for black Americans who engage a Negro folk past as a way of asserting national belonging.

A theatre professional with decades of experience in the American theatre, Lew Payton understood these complexities. Like Ward, and other black dramatists whose work appeared on the federal stage Payton’s career was on both sides of the footlights. Unlike other black playwrights on the FTP, he was nearing the end of a career which had begun in Indianapolis’s vaudeville scene in the 1890s and included a spell in the Harrison Bros. Minstrels. He wrote the book for the musical comedy *In Barnville* (1924) with music by

Sissle and Eubie Blake. The musical was renamed *The Chocolate Dandies* and ran on Broadway in 1925 for ninety-six performances.⁷³ Payton played Pa Williams in the 1929 Broadway adaptation of Wallace Thurman's *Harlem* and appeared in *Boundary Line* (1930), *Solid South* (1930) *Never No More* (1932) *Bridal Wise* (1932) and *Jezebel* (1934) which he labelled white productions.⁷⁴ Anticipating new opportunities for black actors in the movies, Payton moved to Los Angeles where he set up a stage school and secured roles playing butlers in Hollywood films including *On Such a Night* (1937) and *Jezebel* (1938). Payton recognized the power of documenting black creativity through the published text. In the introduction to his self-published collection, he records the "effort and money," he poured into the volume that represented "a culmination of life work and ambition."⁷⁵

Did Adam Sin? And Other Stories of Negro Life in Comedy-Drama and Sketches as a whole offers insight into how Payton understood black theatre and is an example of how black dramatists navigated white representations of the folk. For example, the second drama in Payton's collection, *A Bitter Pill*, is a one-act drama of racial injustice set in Alabama in 1918. Stage directions for the opening scene are a meditation on how black dramatists might engage the white folk drama of black life:

Old Black Joe, as we know him in song, we think of as a loveable character. The Uncle Tom type—as the southern white man would say, a good darkey. So the author takes the theme and character to base his play on—the son of Old Black Joe—so as to show the new type of Negro, the present generation.⁷⁶

By taking the 'theme' and 'character' familiar to audiences of white folk dramas, Payton was able to develop new characters that reflected the values and experiences of a new generation of African Americans on the cusp of modernity. Maintaining a long career beginning with minstrel shows and transitioning to Hollywood, Payton was adept at and perhaps wedded to performing blackness for a dual audience.

Whereas Payton develops black characters that might seem "real" to both white and black audiences, Ward signaled the centrality of the black perspective by positioning his patriarch within the black nationalist Garvey movement. *Big White Fog* was staged by the Chicago Negro Unit in the spring of 1938 after a protracted and contentious period of revision. The play examines three political movements or ideologies with competing visions for black progress between the years 1922 and 1932: Garveyism, capitalism, and communism. Each is represented by a male member of the Mason family; each holds out the promise to redeem black manhood. *Big White Fog* is a domestic tragedy and its hero is Victor

Mason. A graduate of Tuskegee Institute and father of four, Vic is unable to support his family in the South and becomes part of the Great Migration. In Chicago, Vic joins the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the black nationalist movement which offered respect and dignity rarely available to black men in America. The climax of the drama is staged against the backdrop of a union strike which places Vic temporarily out of work. Like the father in Payton's play, Vic is unable to achieve manhood by providing for his family.

However, Ward dramatizes the circumstances through which men are laid off work and their quest for redemption in a movement for black autonomy. These proto-nationalist representations contrast the recognizable stereotypes in Payton's drama: Pa, the out of work black man who is dependent on his wife. Moreover, Vic's quest for manhood is shaped by the racialized gender roles available to African Americans, which meant black women were sometimes more able to secure regular employment. Ward offers a clear critique of this system by representing the Mason family's reliance on the wages of its eldest daughter Wanda, who has left school prematurely in order to start earning. Even so, the family faces the threat of eviction from the family home. When Vic discovers Wanda has had sex with a white man to raise the deposit on a new apartment, he is unmanned. Determined to reassert his role as the male head of the household, Vic accepts an offer of help from his son Les, and his interracial circle of Communist friends joins him in fighting an eviction order. In the final scene, this interracial group of Garveyites and Communists stand together against the white bailiffs. Resisting white authority comes at a cost all too-familiar to black families: Vic is fatally shot. Crucially, the killing of a black father offers no new path to redemption. Vic dies a disappointed man, and his wife and daughter remain alienated from and unreconciled to decisions taken by men.

In recent scholarly literature, Ward's federal theatre drama is often positioned as a socialist realist play examining both Garveyism and communism but resolving in favor of a Marxist vision of triumphant class struggle. In 1938, however, *Big White Fog* was more often understood as a tragedy, an interpretation encouraged by the play's subtitle "A Negro Tragedy."⁷⁷ Debating the themes of the play in 1938, Chicago's black theatre community was more concerned with the dramatization of gender and intraracial conflict staged within *Big White Fog*—themes that echoed Payton's *Did Adam Sin?*—than the representation of communism that has absorbed scholars.⁷⁸ In January 1938, while the Chicago Negro Unit was still working on the production, project supervisor Shirley Graham invited local community leaders to the South Side YWCA to hear Theodore Ward read his new drama.⁷⁹

Encouraged to share their views, few South Siders complained about or even mentioned communism. The only sustained criticism of the play regarding communism came from expected quarters: A. C. MacNeal, Secretary of the Chicago branch of the NAACP. The branch's bitter dispute with the Communist Party of the USA over the handling of the Scottsboro case several years earlier had entrenched the distrust and rivalry between the two groups. MacNeal was adamant that he did not like Ward's play. Insisting that "some of the worst phases of Negro life seem to have been deliberately selected," he made clear that the NAACP "would not under any circumstances sponsor the presentation of the "Big White Fog."⁸⁰ However, in her report to Harry Minturn, the white director of the Chicago FTP, Graham noted that with few exceptions, "whether or not the play was communistic seemed to be of minor importance." Instead, the most common complaint concerned the play's representation of the racial and gender politics of black families. Robert Anderson, who represented a college men's club, found the play "dangerously realistic," and he believed "Many of our members would be offended by the color question as discussed in this play." For Corrine Smith, director of the South Side YWCA, it was the characterization of women that was objectionable. Explaining these and other criticisms to Minturn, Graham highlighted the provocative intraracial dynamics white people were likely to overlook:

the problem of color within Negro race is rather difficult for a white person to understand. No Negro can escape it. This play does tear upon old sores and leave them uncovered and bleeding. You probably know nothing about the 'Garvey movement', but there were people killed right here in Chicago only a few years ago because they were or were not Garveites. [sic] Every West Indian in Chicago will hate this play... The term used in the play 'monkey chaser' is meaningless to most people, but it is even more bitterly resented by people from the West Indie Island (from whence Garvey came) then is "nigger" by the American Negro.

Graham also pinpointed the difficulties posed by the staging of gender conflicts in *Big White Fog*. Wanda's prostitution, she noted, aroused feelings of "shame" in black women and "resentment" in black men.⁸¹

Graham feared the play's representation of both intra-race racism and interracial hatred would make for uncomfortable viewing when staged before integrated audiences. This discomfort was heightened, Graham reported, when Kay Ewing, the white director assigned to Ward's play, announced on the night of the read-through that: "This play is so absolutely typical of the Negro family in Chicago." Ewing's view, and the fear that it would be more widely shared by white audiences, provoked a strong reaction as Graham explained:

Commented [k3]: I have rewritten the section above and used a direct quotation. You/the series editors had altered the quoted passage to include my own words and it was clearly confusing to the reader as to what was a direct quotation and what was my paraphrasing. I have instead inserted the powerful direct quotation above.

People have said to me: ‘This play is not representative of us. We do have many successful businessmen in Chicago our sons do get scholarships —we do support our own businesses — black men are respected not only in their own homes, but throughout the community-our respectable women do not keep all kind of rooming houses—and our girls do not have to sleep with white men to get fifty dollars.’⁸²

Big White Fog laid bare the complex politics of race, gender, and class that informed contemporary debates about the role and behavior of black women in urban spaces. As Hazel Carby has argued, middle-class black and white communities were trying to work out how to refashion the class, gender and racial codes that governed women’s behavior in the early twentieth century. The notion that black women become prostitutes because they are unable to protect themselves in urban environments underpinned the language and frameworks used to police all black women during the Great Migration. Such frameworks positioned black migrating women as desirous of easy work; as such, they represented not only a threat to themselves, but to race progress, relationships between black and white middle-class reformers, and to black masculinity.⁸³ Wanda’s sacrifice—not only taking much-needed money from a white man in exchange for sex but also bringing home a regular wage for her family—challenged the commonly-held notion that it was black working-class women’s unwillingness to work that led them towards sexual vice rather than the racialized economic marketplace. Unlike black and white folk dramas that depicted the ‘low-down’ folk, *Big White Fog* laid claim to a “dangerously realistic” representation of an urban, contemporary, and middle-class black community. It was one thing to frame the “folk” as sexually deviant and in need of reform; suggesting that the racialized narratives used to police lower-class black women might also apply to middle-class African Americans was another. In dramatizing the tragic consequences for black communities who policed black women’s bodies through racist and sexist paradigms, *Big White Fog* reveals how easily classed narratives of racial deviance could be used to oppress ‘respectable’ middle-class African Americans during the years of the Depression.

Did Adam Sin? and *Big White Fog* both explore social hierarchies as sites of contestation within 1930s urban black communities. However, the different generic expectations of each drama have meant the two plays have not been looked at together. Unfortunately, there are no extant reviews of *Did Adam Sin?* to allow us to compare the reception of the two dramas. Yet it seems likely that the connections between the two dramas would not have gone unnoticed by audiences. Many of the actors who starred in *Did Adam*

Sin? were also cast in *Big White Fog* two years later. Gladys Boucree played Ma and Ella, the matriarch in each production, while William McBride played the Deacon and Vic Mason. At least another fourteen Chicago Negro Units actors had roles in both plays. Analyzing the two dramas together helps us understand what was at stake not only in what was said in and about *Big White Fog*, but how it was said. It enables us to place both dramas within a broader framework of black drama of the 1930s which used a variety of forms to critique and interrogate the black family as a metaphor for black political ambition.

“Cinda” and the Boston Negro Unit.

Black-authored folk dramas were a prominent feature of the Boston Negro Unit, the only unit directed from the start by a black theatre professional, Ralf Coleman. Coleman honed his craft through Boston’s Little Theatre scene in the early 1930s, first at the Allied Arts Center and later through the Boston Players, a new group he set up. Even before the WPA organized the Federal Arts Projects in 1935, the African American theatre community in Boston was well placed to take advantage of state-supported theatre opportunities. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) had extended relief to unemployed artists as early as 1933. Small theatre groups were organized and staged spot performances in church and community halls in cities across the US. A WPA press release in 1936 explained: “Of the legitimate theatre groups, the Boston Players have been the most active, having been organized 18 months ago under the Emergency Relief Administration.”⁸⁴ As Lorraine Elena Roses documents in her study *Black Bostonians* (2017), the very first black production funded and staged by FERA workers was *Genesis*, a drama written by H. Jack Bates. It was advertised in the press as “a reimagination of the biblical story transformed into a folk play—with no racial theme and no concrete political agenda.”⁸⁵

Actor, dramatist, and director of the Boston Negro Unit through its four-year history, Coleman was familiar with the charge that black folk plays were at best apolitical and at worst an accommodation to white stereotypes of black life. In 1936 the Boston Negro Unit staged *Brother Mose*, a drama by black actor and playwright Frank Wilson that had first played in Harlem. Coleman was fiercely criticized by some members of Boston’s black theatre community for putting on a folk drama. In a letter published in the *Boston Chronicle* Coleman’s critics complained that the opportunities for black theatre provided by the FTP had been compromised by white prejudice and “half-baked Negro directors.” They insisted there was no place on the stage for “Negro characters indulging in ‘ginswizzling, crap-

shooting and razor cutting' no matter who is doing them."⁸⁶ Coleman refuted the charges. In a letter to the newspaper, he insisted he had "tried for many years to get away from the Uncle Tom stereotype."⁸⁷ He continued to make the case for folk plays in his director's report. Refusing to cede the Negro folk play to white dramatists, Coleman put forward a strong defense of Negro folk plays as the "greatest contribution of the Negro Theatre to the American stage."⁸⁸ In an oral history interview nearly forty years later, Coleman reflected proudly on the black dramatists whose work was staged during by the Negro Unit:

we had our own playwrights also, black playwrights, and we had two very good ones. One was Wright...a Boston boy. He wrote a series of three plays. And then we had another great playwright, by the name of Jack Bates. Jack wrote half a dozen. At that time we called them "folk plays." We didn't call them "black plays." We called them "folk plays." Jack wrote half a dozen folk plays which I produced three or four of them in the Federal Theatre. He was a very gifted writer.⁸⁹

Bates's dramas have not been taken seriously in scholarship on black dramatic literature or histories of the Boston Negro Unit. Mentioned in passing, they are clumped together as derivative of white plays such as "fantasies like *Green Pastures*, black reinterpretations of Bible stories."⁹⁰ One of the early productions of the Boston Negro Unit was Bates's play *Cinda: A Negro Folk Play in Five Scenes*, first staged at the Allied Arts Center in 1930.⁹¹ The Boston Negro Unit production opened on January 21, 1936, and played four performances.⁹² The director's manuscript is held in the federal theatre archive and contains extensive, handwritten amendments, which suggest the earlier version of the play was thoroughly reworked for the Negro Unit production.⁹³ The play has been described as a black version of Cinderella.⁹⁴ It is not. *Cinda* is only very loosely inspired by the classic tale. In the federal theatre drama, Cinda is a hard-working, middle-aged woman and mother of Earl, a college student. Her dream is to "make Earl a somebody." Her sister, the straight-talking and fierce Jo, fears she is working herself into an early grave, but Cinda does not fear hard work. Her job, as she explains to her son, is to sacrifice herself so that the next generation of black men and women have different choices:

God's done showed me the years to come; he let me see with my own eyes the years that passed, with all my folks a digging in the field and living in misery, 'cause they didn't know no better and in my heart he done showed me whats to come if we ain't prepared, that why I want's to prepare you, educate you so you can fix a way for them that comes after you, and they can fix a way for them that comes after them.⁹⁵

Unlike Ella, the stay-at-home mother in *Big White Fog* whose middle-class aspirations are tethered to the employment fortunes of her husband and children, Cinda takes matters into her own hands by seeking employment where she can and accepting underpaid work from white women. Cinda and her sister both recognize the racist structures which limit the opportunities available to the men in their lives. At the same time, the play is critical of men, like Cinda's husband Charlie, who leave it to women to bring up children and look for solace from racial oppression in gambling, drinking, and fighting. In addition to raising their own children as single mothers, Jo and Cinda act as other mothers to children in the community whose parents cannot care for them. Cinda's motherhood is political. Determined to forge a new vision of black masculinity through educating her son, she is clear that the responsibility for this rests with her: "since there ain't none of our men folks that's worth their salt."⁹⁶ That women play a central role in the race struggle is reflected in the staging of key debates about separatism and cooperation with whites. Whereas in *Big White Fog* it is the men who rehearse the argument for self-sufficiency versus working with whites, in Bates's drama, women lead the debate. Cinda views white employers as an unavoidable part of black life, but Jo promotes a philosophy of self-reliance away from the world of whites. Urging her sister not to seek the help of her white female employer, who has helped her in the past, Jo insists: "All her kin do is give you some of that 'losphy for white folks, when it come to us, we's got to use judgment of our own."⁹⁷

In *Cinda* and *Big White Fog*, the struggle to find an empowering masculinity that does not harm black women and men proves overwhelming in a racialized capitalist system that offers few legitimate opportunities for economic security. In *Cinda*, the drama focuses on the attempts of women to create different possibilities for the next generation. The difficulties of finding new avenues for black empowerment in a white supremacist society are underscored when Earl becomes ensnared in his father's underworld of illicit drinking and prostitution. Cinda is ultimately unable to empower her son to resist the competing vision of freedom offered by dancing and drinking at his father's establishment. Charlie's bar promises respite from the disabling effects of white supremacy. Dependent on the subordinate position of black women and violent coercion of other black men, the rules of this world, however, are no more liberating and frequently lead to disastrous consequences. When Earl gives up college for drinking and womanizing, Charlie is confident he has weaned him from his mother: "hes too growed up now, he needs a man to look after him."⁹⁸ But Charlie can no more protect his son than Cinda. Jealous of the favors given the heir apparent, Earl is knifed

by a member of his father's seedy set. Unwilling to risk losing his business on account of criminal activity on his premises, Charlie covers up the stabbing. His son bleeds to death in his mother's arms.

Cinda offers representation of the folk that includes the ginswizzling and razor cutting that white audiences expected and some of Coleman's critics (who he termed the "so-called Negro intelligentsia of Boston") found "objectionable."⁹⁹ Written in dialect and set in the close-knit community of poor black folk, the play has moments of comedy. It does not, however, reproduce the tropes of white folk dramas. Black lives are not presented as essentially comic or predestined to fail: the tragedies that befall black characters are taken seriously. By exploring Earl's transition from childhood to manhood within the context of a loving black home, and the restricted opportunities available to black men, *Cinda* examines how the stereotypes of white Negro folk drama types are made and in turn used to sustain the gender and racial hierarchies that govern American society. The production records for the Boston Negro Unit production of *Cinda* do not document its reception. We know from New York newspapers that Bates collaborated with the actor and playwright Frank Wilson to produce a full-length version of this folk play with a cast of twenty for the Harlem Negro Unit.¹⁰⁰ Yet the Harlem Negro Unit never staged *Cinda*. If they had, Bates, like Ward, might have made it into black theatre anthologies published in the 1970s; his work might have been understood in relation to *Big White Fog* rather than Marc Connelly's *Green Pastures*.¹⁰¹

Folk dramas were a regular feature on the program of Negro Units during the four years of the Federal Theatre Project. Debates about who they were for and what they represented became a source of contention and creativity for the black theatre communities that supported and staffed the Negro Units. African American troupes required to stage white-authored folk dramas found ways to adapt, appropriate, and even resist the images of black life presented by white dramatists. They also created new black folk dramas of their own. These became important vehicles for discussing race and gender conflicts within black families and black political movements. Examining black-authored folk dramas staged by the FTP alongside better-known plays such as *Big White Fog* helps us better understand the generic range of black dramas produced during the Federal Theatre Project. They also help us understand how and when Negro Units could function as spaces where black Americans were able to debate form and articulate a vision of black theatre that met their needs.

¹ Vève Clark, "Restaging Langston Hughes' Scottsboro Limited," in *Black Scholar*, July-August 1979, 62-69, reprinted in Charles Reilly ed., *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, (University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 166, 160.

² Kate Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 5-6. Also see *The Federal Theatre Project: a catalog-calendar of productions*, (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1986).

³ Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene, *Women, Art, and the New Deal*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016), 41-2. Federal Theatre Project Collection Online Finding Aid <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.music/eadmus.mu995001>

⁴ Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal* 14-15, 30-31.

⁵ *Big White Fog* Playbill, Negro Playwrights Company Lincoln Theatre, New York City. Hatch-Billops Collection.

⁶ The landmark anthology is *Black Theater U.S.A.: 45 Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974*, (New York: Free Press, 1974. Edited by James V. Hatch with Ted Shine as consultant it was revised and expanded in 1996. It is discussed below. Baraka affirms its significance for teaching black drama classes in "Foreword," in Hatch and Shine eds., *Black Theater U.S.A.: The Recent Period 1935 to Today* xi.

⁷ Doris E. Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre, 1925-1959* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1969), 86; Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre 1935-1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 163.

⁸ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 26-32.

⁹ The extent to which white dramatists utilized the 'Negro folk' as a source of inspiration in the 1930s can be gleaned from the Federal Theatre Project Papers. The FTP produced innumerable lists of 'Negro drama' much of it authored by whites. They are the basis for subsequent catalogues including "Cultural Diversity in the Federal Theatre Project 1935-1939," a finding aid of "ethnic material" at FTP-GMU and *The Federal Theatre Project: a catalog-calendar of productions*.

¹⁰ In 2016, Green's Pulitzer prizewinning drama *In Abraham's Bosom* received a staged reading at the University of North Carolina to celebrate the centenary anniversary of the Pulitzer Prize. www.paulgreen.org/In%20Abraham's%20Bosom%202016%20reading.pdf accessed 21 Feb. 2018. White-authored 'Negro' folk dramas by Paul Green, Marc Connelly and Ridgely Torrance have remained readily available through the twentieth century. See for example Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory eds., *Plays of Negro Life: A Source-Book of Native American Drama* (1927. Westport, CT: Negro University Press, 1970). John Gassner ed., *Twenty Best Plays of the American Theatre* (New York, NY: Crown, 1939); Burns Mantle and John Gassner ed., *A Treasury of the Theatre; an Anthology of Great plays from Aeschylus to Eugene O'Neill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1939). John Gassner and Clive Barnes, *Fifty Best Plays of the American Theater* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1969); Laurence G. Avery, *A Paul Green Reader*, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

¹¹ Abramson, *Negro Playwrights*, 86; Lorraine Elena Roses, *Black Bostonians and the Politics of Culture 1930-1940*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017), 157; Fraden, *Blueprints*, 163.

¹² Clark, "Restaging Langston Hughes," 165.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ See for example James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), Cheryl Clarke, "*After Mecca*": *Black Women and the Black Arts Movement*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005) and Evie Shockley, *Renegade Politics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*, (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 8.

¹⁶ Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, "The Myth of a Negro Literature," first published in *Saturday Review*, 20 Apr., 1963; Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in *The Drama Review* 12:4 (Summer, 1968), 28-39. Addison Gayle, *The Way of the New World: the Black novel in America* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1975). David Lionel Smith, "The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics," *American Literary History* 3:1 March 1991, 93-110.

¹⁷ Errol Hill, "The Revolutionary Tradition in Black Drama," *Theatre Journal* 38: 4, Dec. 1986, 408-426.

¹⁸ First published as "The Revolutionary Tradition in Afro-American Literature," in *Selected Plays and Prose of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones* (New York: Morrow, 1979), 242-5 and reprinted as Baraka, "Afro American Literature and Class Struggle," *Black American Literature Forum*, 14:1, (Spring, 1980), 9.

¹⁹ Clark, "Staging Langston Hughes," 162; 65.

²⁰ Adam J. Sorkin, *Politics and the Muse: Studies in the Politics of Recent American Literature*, (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, c1989), 234. Scholars have also begun to trace the

influence of Ward's *Big White Fog* on Baraka's later dramas. See Douglas Kern, "Killing in the Name of the Struggle: Amiri Baraka's Revolutionary Theatre," (PhD thesis, University of York, 2014).

²¹ Clark, "Staging Langston Hughes," 160.

²² The Rockefeller Foundation sponsored a short-lived cataloguing project at Vassar College where Hallie Flanagan, FTP director retreated after the closure of the project in 1939 to write her own account *Arena* (1940: Benjamin Blom, 1967). See "Vassar Granted Special Fund by Rockefeller Foundation," *Vassar College News*, 4 Nov. 1939. The Library of Congress recalled the loaned archive in May 1941 as part of a Federal Arts cataloging project begun with the Washington D.C. WPA in 1940. This project was terminated in July 1941. Mary C. Henderson ed., "Federal Theatre Project Records at George Mason University," *Performing Arts Resources*, Vol. 6 (1980), 13-15.

²³ John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown ed., *The Federal Theatre Project: Free, Adult, Uncensored*, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), vii-viii. The history of the recovery of the FTP archive is best told in *Federal One*, the newsletter published by the Research Centre for Federal Theatre at George Mason between 1975 and 1994 and available in Special Collections & Archives, GMU. (SCA-GMU)

²⁴ Oral histories of FTP participants are catalogued under the WPA Oral Histories Collection, 1961-1984, SCA-GMU.

²⁵ Theodore Browne Papers, SCA-GMU

²⁶ A videotape recording of the production is held in SCA-GMU; For the Stanford University production see *Stanford Report*, 5 Feb. 2003 <https://news.stanford.edu/news/2003/february5/natural-25.html>

²⁷ Michelle Gordon has suggested Ward was the most revived black dramatists of the Black Arts Movement, an argument which is supported by the Ward Papers at Emory University. For Gordon, see her talk at Emory University, April 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtnzN1sZD5Q> last accessed 10 Jan. 2018. For a list of Ward plays revived in the 1970s see Ward, "The Works of Theodore Ward: A Chronological Index and descriptive pattern of th[e]ir dramatic contents," 5-6 in Theodore Ward Collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Collections, Emory University. Box 1, Folder 3.

²⁸ Clark, "Restaging Langston Hughes," 159.

²⁹ See for example Woodie King and Ron Milner eds., *Black Drama Anthology*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972). Alongside other early 1970s anthologies, King and Milner's edition included a Langston Hughes drama. See too William Brasmer and Dominick Consolo eds., *Black Drama: An Anthology* (Columbus: Merrill, 1970). One of the first anthologies to include a number of earlier playwrights was Darwin T. Turner, *Black Drama in America: An Anthology* (Greenwich, CT; Fawcett Publications, 1971). It made available a number of black dramas created in the early to mid-twentieth century including Willis Richardson's *The Chip Woman's Fortune*, and Hughes's *Emperor of Haiti*. It also included *Our Lan'*, the 1946 drama by federal theatre playwright, Theodore Ward. The work of Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps and Countee Cullen was anthologized alongside later works in Lindsay Patterson, *Black Theater: a 20th Century Collection of the Work of its Best Playwrights*, (New York: Dodd Mead, 1971).

³⁰ James V. Hatch ed., *Black Theater U.S.A.: 45 Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974*, (New York: Free Press, 1974), Foreword, ix.

³¹ James V. Hatch and Ted Shine eds., *Black Theatre U.S.A.: Plays By African Americans: The Early Period 1847-1938, Revised and Expanded edition* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); James V. Hatch and Ted Shine eds., *Black Theatre U.S.A.: Plays By African Americans, The Recent Period 1935-Today, Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York: The Free Press, 1996). Lorraine Brown, *Liberty Deferred and Other Living Newspapers of the 1930s* (Fairfax, Va: George Mason University Press, 1989). The two published versions of *Liberty Deferred* are very different. The Hatch edition, which includes only the first half of the newspaper up to the period of Reconstruction is a heavily edited version of the Library of Congress federal theatre manuscript. The Brown edition is strikingly different: its conclusion has President Roosevelt signing Executive Order 8802 which prohibited racial discrimination in government defense contracts and was a direct response to A Philip Randolph's planned March on Washington in June 1941. Since these events took place two years after the closure of the Federal Theatre, it is reasonable to surmise that this version of *Liberty Deferred* was amended after the closure of the Federal Theatre Project.

³² *Uncle Tom's Cabin, Green Pastures and Porgy* were included in John Gassner and Clive Barnes, *Fifty Best Plays of the American Theater* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1969).

³³ On the 'discovery' of Ward's play in *Black Theatre U.S.A.* and the Almeida production see Michael Attenborough, "My Search for the Lost Voice of Black America," *The Guardian*, 10 May, 2007, 28. For scholarship see for example E. Quita Craig, *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era: Beyond the Formal Horizon*. (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Fraden, *Blueprints*; Dossett, "Staging the Garveyite Home: Black Masculinity, Failure, and Redemption in Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog*," *African American Review*, 43: 4 (Winter, 2009), 557-576; Harry Elam Jr., "The Politics of Black Masculinity in Theodore Browne's *Natural Man*, 1937" in Cheryl Black and Jonathan Shandell eds. *Experiments in*

Democracy: Interracial and Cross-Cultural Exchange in American Theatre, 1912-1945, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 126-146. Baraka "Foreword," in Hatch and Shine eds., *Black Theatre U.S.A.: The Recent Period 1935 to Today* xi.

³⁴ Hatch and Shine, *Black Theatre U.S.A.: The Early Period, 1847-1938*, viii.

³⁵ Baraka "Foreword," xii.

³⁶ Gene Jarrett, *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in American Literature*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 6.

³⁷ Jarrett, *Deans and Truants*, 6, 11.

³⁸ Fraden has estimated that Bates wrote six dramas for the Boston Negro Unit. Fraden, *Blueprints*, 163.

³⁹ Roses suggests these manuscripts are not available *Black Bostonians*, 216n30. There are however federal theatre manuscripts available at GMU and the Library of Congress: *Juba*, Box 185 and *Genesis*, Box 159, both in SCA-GMU; Also see *Juba*, Box 685, Library Records, FTP Collection, Library of Congress (FTP-LOC).

⁴⁰ http://src.gmu.edu/finding_aids/ftp.html

<http://findingaids.loc.gov/db/search/xq/searchMfer02.xq?id=loc.music.eadmus.mu995001&faSection=overview&faSubsection=did&dmdid=>

Although musical reviews are mentioned in recent studies of particular Negro Units, Roses, (Boston) and Moore (North Carolina units) there is as yet no in-depth study of musical reviews together on the FTP. Cecelia Moore, *The Federal Theatre Project in the American South: the Carolina Playmakers and the Quest for American Drama*, (Lanham, Lexington Books, 2017), esp. Ch. 2: 45-80.

⁴¹ Paul Nadler attributes *Stars and Bars* to Courtney. Nadler, "Liberty Censored: Black Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project," *African American Review*, 29:4, (1995): 616. Ward Courtney and the Hartford Negro Unit, *Stars and Bars*, FTP Play Script & Radio Script Collection, SCA-GMU, Box 6.

⁴² Moore, *The Federal Theatre Project on the American South*, 50-51; Tina Redd, "Birmingham's Federal Theater Project Negro Unit: The Administration of Race," in Harry J. Elam Jr and David Krasner eds., *African American Performance and Theater History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 284.

⁴³ Moore, *The Federal Theatre Project on the American South*, 32-33.

⁴⁴ Negro Press Digest for, Week Ending 5 June, 1937, 5. RG69, Works Progress Administration, *New Deal Agencies and Black America in the 1930s (NDABA)* (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1984), Reel 9.

⁴⁵ Moore, *The Federal Theatre Project on the American South*, 74.

⁴⁶ Darryl Dickinson-Carr, "African American Literature and the Great Depression," in Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward, Jr eds., *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 288, 290. Sharon Ann Musher, *Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture*, (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3; Stacy Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

⁴⁷ Locke, "The Saving Grace of Realism," *Opportunity*, 13 (Jan. 1934): 8-11, 30.

⁴⁸ Sonnet Retman, *Real folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

⁴⁹ Locke and Gregory eds., *Plays of Negro Life*, esp. "The Drama of Negro Life," xiii-xviii.

⁵⁰ Judith R Berzon, *Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (New York: New York University Press, 1978). Although white critics welcomed this "tragedy charged with primitive emotion" and Locke and Gregory continued to support Green's 'folk' dramas, other black critics were more wary. The writer and leftist activist Eugene Gordon despaired of the white dramatist's "false fatalism" while W.E.B Du Bois lamented that Green's dramas always ended with "lynching, suicide or degeneracy," quoted in Fraden, 101. Frustrated by Green's perpetuation of the tragic mulatto, Langston Hughes reputedly wrote his own play *Mulatto* in response to seeing a rehearsal of Green's play. Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch eds., *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 527n16.

⁵¹ *The Federal Theatre Project: a catalog-calendar of productions* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1986).

⁵² Flanagan, *Arena*, 28; 221.

⁵³ Blanding Sloan to Lavery, 25 Apr. 1938, Box 162, E878, Record Group 69, National Archives, (RG69, NA).

⁵⁴ Thomas Wood Stevens to Hallie Flanagan, 31 Jan. 1936, E856, Box 99, RG69, NA.

⁵⁵ Richard Wright, *Black Boy: American Hunger, A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 364-365.

⁵⁶ Robert Griffin, "The Negro Theatre in Durham," *Backstage: A Publication of the North Carolina Federal Theatre Projects*, Vol. 2, No. 7, 5-7. FTP-LOC.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 5-6.

- ⁵⁹ Hiram Motherwell "Play Reports: John Henry," 3, in National Office, General Correspondence, E829, Box 229, RG69, NA.
- ⁶⁰ "John Henry," Playreaders Reports, Box 232, FTP-LOC.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² "John Henry," Production Bulletin, Production Records, Box 1026, FTP-LOC
- ⁶³ See for example: Abramson, *Negro Playwrights*, 86; Roses, *Black Bostonians*, 157; Fraden, *Blueprints*, 163.
- ⁶⁴ Hazel Rowley, *Life and Times of Richard Wright*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2001), 113-114; 538n24; Wright, *Black Boy*, 364-365.
- ⁶⁵ Kate Dossett, "Staging the Garveyite Home: Black Masculinity, Failure and Redemption in Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog*," *African American Review*, 43.4 (2009): 557-576; Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), esp. 64-80. Gerald Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000), 77, 299n51; Vanita Marion Vactor, "A History of the Chicago Federal Theatre Project Negro Unit, 193-1939," (PhD Thesis: New York University, 1998), 42.
- ⁶⁶ *Romey and Julie* was written by a trio which included Ruth Chorppening, James Norris and the African American Robert Dunham, a well-known member of the Richard B. Harrison Players, one of eight or so Negro Little Theatres that operated in Chicago in the first decades of the twentieth century. Dunham directed the production which played eleven performances beginning April 1st to over two thousand patrons, Vactor, 42-43; 109; *Did Adam Sin?* ran for six performances at an assembly hall on the South Side. See *Did Adam Sin?* Playbill, Chicago Theatre Collection, Historic Programs, *Special Collections, Chicago Public Library, Chicago*.
- ⁶⁷ Lew Payton, *Did Adam sin: and Other Stories of Negro Life in Comedy-Drama and Sketches*, (Lew Payton: Los Angeles, 1937).
- ⁶⁸ *Did Adam Sin?* 22-23.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 28
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 20
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 30.
- ⁷² "Did Adam Sin Playbill."
- ⁷³ Payton, "Introduction," in, *Did Adam Sin*, 8; Bernard L. Peterson, *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers*, (New York; London: Greenwood Press, 1990), 162.
- ⁷⁴ Payton, "Introduction," in *Did Adam Sin*, 8
- ⁷⁵ *Did Adam Sin*, 132.
- ⁷⁶ "A Bitter Pill," in *Did Adam Sin*, 62.
- ⁷⁷ The subtitle was subsequently dropped from the published anthologized versions See Hatch, *Black Theatre U.S.A* and *Black Theatre U.S.A: Revised and Expanded edition, Vol. 1*. The subtitle is however included in the various manuscript versions of held in the federal theatre archives at the LOC Playscripts File Box 597, FTP-LOC and the National Archives Playscripts File, 1936-39, E914 Box 271, RG69, NA. For reviews of the play as a tragedy see for example Lloyd Lewis, "Pathos of Modern Negro Life Shown in Play a Negro Tragedy." *Daily News*, 8 Apr. 1938 and Paul T. Gilbert, "Race Problem Theme of Big White Fog," 8 Apr. 1938, *Herald & Examiner* both in Big White Fog Production Notebook, Production Records, Box 983, FTP-LOC.
- ⁷⁸ See for example Michelle Yvonne Gordon "The Chicago Renaissance," in Gene Andrew Jarrett ed., *A Companion to African American Literature*, (Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 282; Harry J. Elam Jr., "Post-World War II African American Theatre," in, *Oxford Handbook of American Drama*, 377; Alan Wald, "Theodore Ward," in Steven C. Tracey eds., *Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance*, (Urbana, Springfield, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 329. Both Fraden and Hatch focus less on the handful of Communists who appear on the stage at the end and more on what they saw as a call for populist unity and broad coalitions of the labor movement. Fraden, *Blueprints*, 118, and Hill and Hatch eds., *A History of African American Theatre*, 323.
- ⁷⁹ Shirley Graham to Harry Minturn, 5 Feb. 1938, Regional Office 1937-38, E970, Box 618-621, RG69, NA.
- ⁸⁰ Graham to Minturn, 5 Feb. 1938; B. B. Church to Graham, 16 Jan. 1938 in Shirley Graham, Memorandum to E. Kendall Davis, 24 Jan. 1938; A.C. MacNeal to Shirley Graham, 22 Jan. 1938 all in Regional Office Chronological Corr. File 1937-38, E970, Box 618-621, RG69, NA.
- ⁸¹ Graham to Minturn, 5 Feb. 1938.
- ⁸² Ibid.
- ⁸³ Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry*, 18:4 (Summer, 1992), 740-741.
- ⁸⁴ Works Progress Administration Press Release, Record Group 69, Works Progress Administration, Folder: National Office, Subject File "N", 2, NDABA, Reel 24; Roses, *Black Bostonians*, 99; Fraden, *Blueprints*, 162.
- ⁸⁵ Roses, *Black Bostonians*, 157.
- ⁸⁶ "Our Federal Theatre," *Boston Chronicle*, 10 Oct. 1936, 4; Fraden, *Blueprints*, 163.
- ⁸⁷ "In Our Mail: Coleman at Bay," *Boston Chronicle*, 24 Oct. 1936: 4.

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- ⁸⁸ Coleman, Director's Report, Brother Mose, Production Bulletin, Production Records, FTP- LOC, Box 1063.
- ⁸⁹ Ralf Coleman interviewed by Paula Singer, Nov 24 1972. Hatch-Billops Collection SC-GMU. 24 Nov. 1972, Tape 1, Side 1.
- ⁹⁰ Fraden, 163.
- ⁹¹ Roses, *Black Bostonians*, 137.
- ⁹² "Data on Negro Productions in Massachusetts" in Negro Drama Corr., Nov. 1935 to Apr. 1939 in *NDABA*.
- ⁹³ H. Jack Bates, *Cinda*, SCA-GMU, Box 133.
- ⁹⁴ Bernard L. Peterson, *The African American Theatre Directory, 1816-1960*, (Westport, Conn.; London: Greenwood Press, 1997), 71.
- ⁹⁵ *Cinda*, 1: 7.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1: 7.
- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3: 1.
- ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5: 9.
- ⁹⁹ Coleman, Director's Report, Brother Mose, Production Bulletin, Production Records, FTP- LOC, Box 1063
- ¹⁰⁰ "Frank Wilson to Stage Play," *New York Amsterdam News*, 3 Oct. 1936, 10; "News of the Stage," *New York Times*, 25 Sept. 1936, 21.
- ¹⁰¹ The Harlem Negro Unit staged a variety of white-authored and new black dramas including labor plays and comedies as well as dramatizations of Haitian independence. On the eve of the closure of the FTP, they were rehearsing Theodore Browne's historical drama *Go Down Moses*.