

From the Desk of the Editor-In-Chief

Introduction to the Black Theatre Review, Crossroads

With the support of The Black Seed Fund, the Black Theatre Network (BTN) launches a new biannual, peer reviewed, open-access, online scholarly journal, *the Black Theatre Review (tBTR)*. In keeping with the vision of BTN, *the Black Theatre Review* seeks to be a scholarly repository of scholarship that critically reviews and documents the history, formation, and performance of Black Theatre wherever it is expressed throughout the world. I am honored to serve as the journal's inaugural editor-in-chief and am grateful to BTN founders who entrusted me, and my colleagues, Corey Roberts, Kamesha Khan, and Melda Beaty with this new endeavor. We are also deeply appreciative for the institutional partnership and support provided by the University Library System of the University of Arizona.

This inaugural issue of *the Black Theatre Review* is the manifestation of conceptual talks which began in earnest in spring 2021 and individual personal musings which began long before that moment. Given the multidisciplinary backgrounds of everyone involved and our collective desire to build on and expand the legacy of tBTR's predecessor, *Continuum: the Journal of African Diasporic Drama, Theatre and Performance*, we encouraged transdisciplinary submissions that used Black performance as a lens to acknowledge and explore the concept of crossroads: the intersections of past, present, and future; the dynamics of power and disempowerment; the diverging and converging of gender, sexuality, and sensorial and lived experience; performance and performativity; incarnation and reincarnation; the supernatural and the mundane; portable, mediatory, expansive, contractive, seen and unseen. The call was answered by scholars who engage the crossroads through explorations of Black performance and performativity across private and public stages and various forms of cultural production including foodways, film, and print avenues.

Volume one opens with "A Hidden Figure: Beth Turner and Black Masks," where Khalid Y. Long gives critical and overdue attention to playwright, pedagogue, and publisher Beth Turner. For nearly four decades, Turner has served the theatre community through documenting the work of Black Theatre practitioners, playwrights, advocates, and scholars in *Black Masks*, the "oldest continuously operating periodical devoted to Black Theatre and performance." Long argues that Turner's documentation of hidden figures, in a pre-social media period is significant step in closing gaps in the field.

Long's interview is followed by "Preparing Soul Food: Investigating Performativity vis-à-vis Cultural Memory" by Michelle Gibbs. Gibbs explores Black performativity via "soul" foodways to analyze how the preparation and consumption of some Black American soul foods contributes to memory retention, meaning construction, and complicates the perception of Black identities. She investigates oral performances, textual reenactments, and the preparation of key

soul food icons within the archive of her own matriarchal lineage to illuminate broader ideas about how culture is maintained, transmitted, and evaluated.

Seven years ago, *Continuum* published a special issue on [Amiri Baraka](#). This inaugural volume of *tBTR*, in some ways, responds to the summons issued by then editor Harry J. Elam, Jr. who decreed, “In its richness of language and style as well as its political commentary, Baraka’s work endures and requires repeated critical examination.”¹ Baraka and the revolutionary 60s—its politics, aesthetics, and cultural production—remain central sites of investigation in the next four contributions of this issue. In “‘A [B]lack Baudelaire?’: Rereading French Symbolism and Amiri Baraka’s 1960s Life and Work,” Shadow Zimmerman offers a close reading of two of Baraka’s works, *Dutchman* and *A Black Mass*, through the lens of French Symbolism, to explain Baraka’s navigation of his conflicting personal and political choices, and evolution from being “A [B]lack Baudelaire” to becoming a Black Muslim. Zimmerman utilizes French Symbolism even while critiquing its limitations to further our understanding of Baraka’s use of symbolism as a key aesthetic of his artistic practice and exorcism of aspects of whiteness within his personal and dramaturgical praxis.

“Queering the Politics of Black Respectability by Krystal D. Tift” challenges the respectability politics of the 60s by discussing the overt omission of wholistic, multidimensional portrayals of queer personhood within Black Revolutionary Theatre, noting what she terms the movements’ “conditional embrace” of black queerness. Tift places Baraka’s *The Baptism* in conversation with Ed Bullins’ *Clara’s Ole Man*, two major plays of the Black Arts Movement era, to explore how both playwrights used queer characters (“caricatures”) as plot devices to further their own Black Nationalist agendas. However, Tift argues, such agendas were “unblack” due to the invalidation and exclusion of the LGBTQ+ sector of the Black community.

In “An Angel, a Thief, and a Mothership: Black Movements through Time and Space,” Danielle Howard directly invokes crossroad imagery through the film, “The Last Angel of History,” to discuss the ways in which Black performances—blues, archaeological, digital (i.e. sampling)—challenge the use of a linear expressive order as an approach to identity construction, and in some ways frees racialized individuals from oppressive historical impositions and stolen or concealed pasts. Through her ancestral invocation of Sun Ra, George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic, and “The Mothership Connection,” Howard argues for the redemptive qualities of Black speculative fiction as both a root and route through which racialized individuals can envision new and hopeful futures.

¹ Harry J. Elam “Editorial Notes: Remembering Amiri Baraka,” in Amiri Baraka Reevaluation and Appreciation, *Continuum, the Journal of African Diasporic Drama, Theatre & Performance* 1, no. 2, (2015). <https://continuumjournal.org/index.php/component/content/article/36-volumes/issues/vol-1-no-2-amiri-baraka-reevaluation-and-appreciation/vol-1-no-2-general-documents/88-remembering-amiri-baraka>

In “Say Their Names: Drama of the Age in Black Lives Matter” Deborah Geis draws upon the legacy of Black revolutionary drama to contextualize BLM plays of the contemporary present by writers such as Anna Deveare Smith, James Ijames, and Antoinette Nwandu. Geis argues that BLM Drama is a “type of crossroad” in that it is very much informed by the aesthetics of Black revolutionary dramas of the 60s, as well as the work of contemporary playwrights who resurrect, revise, and reimagine history, and challenge audiences “to confront their own racialized assumptions by turning a mirror on the nature of performance, complicity, and spectatorship.”

We close this inaugural issue with two reviews. The first is a production review of *Skeleton Crew*, Tony Award® nominee Dominique Morisseau’s meditation on a Black working-class community at the heart of America’s automotive industry, directed by directed by Tony Award® winner Ruben Santiago-Hudson at the Manhattan Theatre Club. Morisseau speaks directly to the theme of crossroads in her dramatic exploration of power and disempowerment and choice in the face of crisis. The second is a book review of *Breaking It Down: Audition Techniques for Actors of the Global Majority* (2021) by Nicole Hodges Persley and Monica Ndounou, a guidebook for actors of the global majority on ways to break down auditions and rehearsal processes through culturally affirming techniques. Through this necessary work, Persley and Ndounou join other scholar practitioners of color, past and present, who are reshaping the field of acting and acting instruction.

Now, “put a glide in your stride and a dip in your hip”² as you enter this transmedia crossroads, our contemplative offering to our committed fight for freedom in a world where confusion and chaos continue to confront us. And though we are all standing at crossroads conjured through ongoing pandemics—health, racial, housing, financial, and political—may our “sweet chariots...swing down; stop and let [us] ride.”³ The choice on how we respond to these collective crises and imagine new futures is still ours.

—Omiyemi (Artisia) Green

² Parliament. “Mothership Connection (Star Child),” *Mothership Connection*, Casablanca, 1975.

³ Ibid.