

From the Desk of the Editor-In-Chief

Introduction to the Black Theatre Review, Representation

With continuing support from The Black Seed Fund, *the Black Theatre Review* offers the second installment of its inaugural volume: *Representation*. Joining myself and Corey Roberts—who is transitioning out of the Managing Editor role—in curating this issue is Dr. Michelle Cowin Gibbs, the new Managing Editor of *tBTR*. Michelle has been actively engaged since last summer, and Corey and I are grateful for her expertise, critical eye, and enthusiasm for the work ahead. I will remain forever grateful to Corey for his leadership in helping me launch *tBTR*—both conceptually and technologically—and for his key role in garnering institutional support from the University Library System of the University of Arizona for this peer-reviewed, open-access, online scholarly journal.

As is customary for *tBTR*, we encouraged transdisciplinary submissions that used Black performance as a lens to acknowledge and explore the concept of *Representation*, which we described as:

an act of inclusivity that responds to the inquiry of who or what should be present. Many times, representation is a responsible intervention, and sometimes we don't know something is being represented until it is named. However, representation is also economically viable and artistically exploitative (i.e., whose story should we tell in this moment?). Representation can be a tool of respectability politics to the exclusion of the duality and nuance that exists within all of us and within every moment. Representation can look like diversity with questionable intentions: no funding, no equity, no justice, and no subversion or dismantling of systems. Tokenism and pioneerism are forms of representation that are overused, often undercompensated, and highly taxed. What are the metrics of representation and who determines the quality of what is being represented? The call was answered by scholars who engage the theme of representation through historical revision, ritual, coverage of critical scholarship in Black performance, and dramaturgy.

Volume 1, Issue 2 opens with La Tanya Reese Rogers' "Black Surrogacy: Black Surrogacy: Topdog/Underdog and Suzan-Lori Parks' Dramatic Aesthetic." The white benchmarks or standards against which authors measure themselves are disrupted in Rogers' concept of Black Surrogacy. Building upon Toni Morrison's discussion of surrogacy in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Rogers argues that in *Topdog/Underdog* white literary and historical figures are replaced with unseen Black characters to not only uncover and critique history and its iconic historical players, but also to "scrutinize contemporary society" (6). Per Rogers, amid so many plays about Abraham Lincoln, Parks heard a "voice" asking for another representation of Lincoln (6), resulting in her Pulitzer Prize winning neo-

historical drama, *Topdog/Underdog*, with its Black surrogates, Lincoln and Booth. Though they were unable to escape their fate, Rodgers opines that Parks' revisionist historiography through Black Surrogacy—an antidote to historical and artistic whitewashing—makes the historical archive more inclusive and allows for more comprehensive interpretations of American history in its inclusion of the underrepresented, disregarded, and subdued African presence in America.

“Afro-Iraqi Rituals: Stigma, Discrimination, and Resilience” by co-authors Amir Al-Azraki and Thawrah Yousif Yaqoob demonstrates the critical importance of cultural heritage representation in the face of the growing extinction; of culture bearers and *makeed* keepers within the Afro-Iraqi community; and finally, of perceptions of irreligiosity, systemic challenges, vituperative treatment, and “negative representation” (16) at local and international levels. Al-Azraki and Yaqoob take a qualitative and observational approach to the documentation of Afro-Iraqi rituals with the purpose of maintaining identity, healing and empowering practitioners, and maintaining harmony between temporal and spiritual ambits. Their essay is the first to document ritual enactments that have largely been maintained privately and/or through orature.

Benjamin Douglas contributes to this issue with a review of Juanita Karpf's *In Performing Racial Uplift: E. Azalia Hackley and African American Activism in the Postbellum to Pre-Harlem Era* (2022). Madame Emma Azalia Smith Hackley was a 19th century moderate activist for racial progress, educator, musician, and fundamental contributor to the development of Black Theatre expressivity. Mme. Hackley demonstrated her commitment to racial uplift through several firsts. According to Karpf, Hackley was the first Black performer to establish a music training school for African American musicians; originator of a unique pedagogical approach to teaching music to Black students en masse, and “without peer” as a mass choir director. Of Karpf's investigations, Douglas asserts that Hackley's pageantry, which emphasized Black female leadership, was a “precursor to feminist Afrofuturism, [in its exploration of] the possibilities of a context imbued with a gendered and racialized interpretation of global relations and governments” (35). In Douglas' estimation, Karpf's study makes an important contribution to the field and is organized suitably for a wide range of scholars including those of “race, colorism, and eugenics; women's studies; music and music education; Jim Crow travel; Negro patriotism around World War One; and New Thought spirituality and philosophy in the postbellum to pre-Harlem era” (34).

Sometimes a submission does not fall neatly into the categories of an article, review, or letter to the editor, but its content bears significant weight for the discipline. A new section for this and future volumes of *the Black Theatre Review* is “Notes from the Field,” where brief specialized content is offered that contextualizes significant events in Black Theatre history and performance, praxis, or pedagogy. President of the August Wilson Society, Sandra G. Shannon, contributes to this section with “Constructing August Wilson: The Writer's Landscape Permanent Exhibit Housed at Pittsburgh's August Wilson African American Cultural Center, An

Insider’s View.” Her note describes her involvement in the development of the new permanent exhibit at the August Wilson African American Cultural Center (AWAACC), *August Wilson: The Writer’s Landscape*. This exhibit, which opened in April 2022, precedes but no doubt complements the wealth of artifacts preserved in the new August Wilson Archive at the University of Pittsburgh. Shannon’s documentary note reminds me of the critical role Black women play not only in Wilson’s American Century Cycle (despite their limited representation therein), but also in the ongoing proliferation of Wilsonian studies and the collection of his work for public access.

Enjoy this issue, our scholarly meditation to an ongoing pursuit of ensuring not just representation but *meaningful inclusion*.

—Omiyemi (Artisia) Green