

From the desk of the Editor-in-Chief

Introduction to the Black Theatre Review, *Nurturing*

In the words of Angelique Motunrayo C-Dina, Volume 3, Issue 1 of *the Black Theatre Review* is for “all the Black women and femmes who found the rainbow and decided *they* were enough” (emphasis mine). The call for this issue invited writers to explore the collective body of Black and African Diasporic theatre history, dramatic literature, performance and production, digital art, artistic leadership, pedagogy, and praxis for elements of nurturing. For this issue, nurturing is defined as the acts, rituals, and strategies of care that enhance one’s inner power and enable them to flow toward joy and vitality.

Black women scholars, artists, and administrators often teach, conduct research and creative scholarship, govern, build, and nurture within institutional systems in the face of lack and their own peril. When the call for this issue was written in January 2024, a short interval of several highly profiled deaths was at the forefront of my mind. Dr. Joanne A. Epps, Temple University’s first Black female president, was pronounced dead on September 19th shortly after falling ill—literally—at a memorial service. At the time of her death, she had served the university as president for 161 days. Three days after Dr. Epps’ death, Volunteer State Community College announced the unexpected passing of Dr. Orinthia T. Montaque. She was 56 years old and died in the same month as the anniversary of her presidency at Volunteer State. The causes of death for these two leaders are unknown, but within the academic community, there were suppositions of stress as a contributing factor. Four months later, Dr. Claudine Gay, the first Black female president of Harvard University, resigned after six months amidst allegations of antisemitism and plagiarism. Six days after Dr. Gay’s resignation, it was announced that Dr. Antoinette “Bonnie” Candia-Bailey, VP of Student Affairs at Lincoln University of Missouri, un-
alived herself due to employment-related “harm and mental damage”¹ and from being “intentionally harassed and bullied.”² At the time of her passing, she had served in her administrative post for nine months.

Alongside these publicized transitions in the lives and careers of Black women in higher education, I was also privately holding the knowledge of many Black women theatre professors who, because of “gendered and racialized oppression” had been or were actively being pushed to “the brink of sanity and stability” as discussed by Paul Michael Thomson, a contributor in this

¹ Lauren Turman, “Emails Surface from LU’s VP of Student Affairs Sent the Day She Died by Suicide,” *KRCG*, January 12, 2024, updated January 19, 2024, <https://krcgtv.com/news/local/emails-surface-from-lus-vp-of-student-affairs-sent-the-day-she-died-by-suicide>.

² Turman, “Emails.”

issue. Citing the work of Sonia Sanchez, who describes “the brink” as “the slow suicide/of seclusion,”³ Thompson sees the brink as the location of a “metaphorical death” that can potentially move one to a place of self-love. In holding the stories each woman shared with Michelle Cowin Gibbs and I during our session at the 2023 Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference (“The Ananse Enclave: An Intervention for Black Women Theatre Faculty”), I have vivid memories of the community formed from their courage and expressions of vulnerability. I see their tears and remember the pressure of holding back my own seething hot saltwater. I see their hands holding and massaging their pained hearts and remember the moments my own joy in the Ivory Tower was threatened. I “see” the words of some of the women bottle-necked in their throats and remember all the times I stopped myself in a meeting and internally asked, “Are you choosing comfort or disruption in what you will say next?” I hear their words, colored by degrees of vocal intensity and speed, expressed with the hope that telling their story, again, would offer new clarity about their conditions, or finally tender a solution or divine intervention. And when I heard their stories, it reminded me of just how much more of my own personal healing was necessary. The academic year prior, I too was on the edge of the brink. The faculty hearing regarding the grievance I filed against seven senior department members had concluded. My joint appointment agreement was up for renewal, and the deans and I were meeting to discuss my choices for a suitable path forward. With the force of my own self-love, I asserted that I would not “let these people kill me.” I remember the ensuing silence and watching the Dean of Arts & Science lower her head to write something down. After a moment, she looked up and asked, “Is there no path to reconciliation?” I sat back in my chair, looking at my white t-shirt with the red words “Juju” displayed across the Zoom screen, and said, “I am a priest. I am always open to reconciliation. There are matters for which the institution is solely accountable, but I have the responsibility of reconciling that which has been broken in me because of these circumstances.”

In the days after Dr. Candia-Bailey’s transition, Black women across the nation gathered in-person and via Zoom to see how we could reconcile the parts of us that felt broken, share resources, and collectively devise strategies for building resilience, thriving, and finding joy. As part of these efforts at reconciliation, Michelle and I felt called to respond with a service-oriented issue. As we mused on the submissions and narrowed them down to the contents before you, we were nurtured in ways that we hope you will be too. Volume 3, Issue 1 includes articles from Etsuko Taketani, Paul Michael Thomson, Angelique Motunrayo C-Dina, and Mysia Anderson, a note from the field of intimacy coordination by Ann C. James, a care syllabus by the Black Water Women Collective, a poetic meditation on heartache and love by Lisa Yancey, Garrison Paiges’ book review of *A Review of Dramatic Movement of African American Women: The Intersections of Race, Gender, and Class* by Yuvraj Nimbaji Herode, and a contemplative affirmation audio

³ Sonia Sanchez, “summary,” as seen in John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Edward Smethurst, eds., *SOS/Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 296.

mix by Michelle C. Chatman. Collectively, the entries move Black women—protagonists, playwrights, contemporary icons—from the margins to the center. Black Feminist and Afro-indigenous acts, rituals, and strategies of care are explicit and remind readers that love can be found everywhere. In all circumstances, a real revolution occurs within.

Articles

The survivability of concepts of “nation, home, family, society, and history” are nurtured in Taketani’s “Girlhood in *What Use Are Flowers?: Lorraine Hansberry, the Postapocalyptic Earth, and Nurturing.*” Hansberry’s posthumously published play, *What Use Are Flowers?*, and Taketani’s treatment of it and the play that precedes it, *Gedachtnis*, eerily parallel ideas at the heart of current political discourse and the threat of World War III. Taketani argues that Lily, a female child survivor of a nuclear holocaust, featured in both plays, “invites a postapocalyptic feminist reading of girlhood and its human–plant conditions where girls [like Black women] are reduced to a bare existence, to the level of vegetation or flowers waiting to be appreciated and used, as a contested terrain through which patriarchy is both nurtured and challenged.

Thomson’s “¡¡¡SOY NEGRA!!!”/“i found god in myself”: Shange, Santa Cruz, and Self-Love as Savior,” places Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls...* in a “diasporic dialogue” with “Me Gritaron Negra,” by the legendary Afro-Peruvian theatre artist, Victoria Santa Cruz. Thomson argues that these two choreopoems demonstrate the transnational reach of Black Feminist thinking. In his treatment of both plays, he argues that both texts are thematically paralleled in their centering of “Black womanhood, self-love, the body, political consciousness, and the intersection of the four,” and their emphasis on self-love as a key part of “transforming society to be more just, more antiracist, more equitable, and more *free*.”

Similarly, in “*BLKS and Single Black Female: Joy within the Margin*,” C-Dina brings Aziza Barnes’ *BLKS* and Lisa B. Thompson’s *Single Black Female* into conversation with one another. C-Dina cites Audre Lorde’s idea of the erotic as an “internal sense of satisfaction” and reframes the margin as a site of “radical joy” (where the erotic can be found) for Black women and femmes. In C-Dina’s estimation, these plays “evoke both the erotic and the joy within the margin through the collective experiences of Black women from different generations exploring their journey of radical joy and the sensation of the erotic.”

The first Black librarian in Myrtle Grove K-8 Center in Miami-Dade County, Florida is the subject of Anderson’s essay, “Dr. Dorothy Jenkins Fields: Nurturing the Landscape of Black Miami Studies.” Dr. Fields diversified the book collection of Myrtle Grove and established the Black Archives History and Research Foundation to “collect and preserve the rapidly vanishing material that reflects the African American experience in Miami-Dade County.” One of their major archival projects included the acquisition and revitalization of the historic Lyric Theatre in Overtown, “possibly the most beautiful and costly playhouse owned by Colored people in all the

Southland.” Anderson argues that Dr. Field’s work as a historical preservationist, developer of institutions, and placemaker is an “emancipatory strategy” that nurtures a Black Miami future.

Book Review

Paige reviews Yuvraj Nimbaji Herode’s *Dramatic Movement of African American Women: The Intersections of Race, Gender, and Class* (2023). Described as a “meticulously researched...must-read,” Paige argues that this five-chapter text illuminates how playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, and Suzanne Lori-Parks “use playwriting as a tool to fight against racism, sexism, and classism.” While the text does not cover more contemporary Black women playwrights, the book may be a great resource for anyone looking for a fresh perspective on key figures in Black theatre.

Notes from the Field

Notes from the Field include two practical resources. In the first note, “When Black Women Speak,” James pointedly asks, “What can we create together as a standard of mental, physical, spiritual, and purpose-driven health for ourselves and for the generations who will follow their hearts into the complicated theatre landscape? To answer this question, she reached out to eight colleagues within her professional network. Some of their answers, paraphrased here, included:

1. Cease overextending yourself and set personal boundaries.
2. Make choices that align with your values.
3. Prioritize your mental health, peace and emotional well-being. Identify environments to exist in where you can simultaneously “work and heal.”
4. Initiate your own impulses.
5. Find joy in your own “unique viewpoints, cultural inheritance, and skill set.”

The second resource is a care syllabus from the Black Water Women Collective (BW²C). During the 2023 Association for Theatre in Higher Education Conference, Mysia Anderson, Nina Angela Mercer, Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie, and I offered a theatre of care workshop “as a space for reflection, healing, and collective reconsideration for Black women.” Understanding the essentiality of water to life, our artmaking, and scholarship, BW²C devised a care syllabus that featured water as a central element within the suggested self-care rituals and recommended books, plays, music, and films offered. Their care syllabus also includes Tallie’s *10 Self-Care Tips for Artists, Activists, and Other Folks Who Give a Damn*.

Artistic Practice as Scholarship

In *Artistic Practice as Scholarship*, we are pleased to offer readers two items, Yancey’s “Love in Grief” and Chatman’s “I AM Affirmation.” The loss of her friend, Georgianna Pickett, inspired Yancey’s three-part poetic reflection, “Love in Grief.” For her, love is “the safeguarding of our undoing,” and the “embrace [which] realigned a spine beveled by the weight of a broken heart. “Love in Grief” is the reminder or affirmation that when our beloveds transition, their form indeed changes, but their spirits remain with us so long as we remember them.

We close the issue with Chatman’s contemplative affirmation. Chatman is the Founding Director of Integrate Mindfulness, LLC. Part of the National Coalition for Health Equity, Integrate Mindfulness LLC offers transformative services in leadership development, women’s empowerment, contemplative coaching, and meeting facilitation. Vested in racial healing and social justice, Chatman devised the audio mediation, “I AM Affirmation,” “to remind *you* of your inherent goodness” (emphasis mine). In the mix, she pronounces four affirmative statements that she argues make up “a structure of being.” In acapella fashion, she powerfully chants an affirmative ontological awareness into existence:

We are here.

We are safe.

We are worthy.

We are enough.

As I concluded my editorial notes on Tuesday, July 23rd, I learned that the body camera footage of the July 6, 2024 murder of Sonya Massey (Springfield, IL) by Deputy Sean Grayson was released. Just before her death, Sonya Massey called her “divine protection into being.” “I rebuke you in the name of Jesus,”⁴ she said, and the hot water Grayson attempted to avoid flowed right to his feet, symbolic of the troubled waters he now navigates. As many of us vacillate between hope and effort to elect the first Black female president and the despair of the loss of another Black woman at the hands of police, may we all be reminded of the power of what the Yorùbá call “*ọfọ àṣẹ*”—the power of justifiably spoken words that are used to call in what is needed at the moment. Safety. Healing. Rescue. Neutralization. Joy. Vitality.

Enjoy this issue as an offering. It is our intervention towards the collective action of Black women to remember our inner power and to reconcile that which feels. I look forward to seeing you in Winston-Salem, N.C. at the Black Theatre Network’s 38th Annual Conference, *Centering Blackness: Nurturing the Creative Spirit*.

⁴ Eric Levenson, Jillian Sykes, and Brad Parks, “Illinois Police Release Bodycam Video of Fatal Shooting of Black Woman in Her Home,” *CNN*, July 23, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/22/us/sonya-massey-police-shooting/index.html>.

Omiyemi (Artisia) Green

—Omiyemi (Artisia) Green
Editor-in-Chief
the Black Theatre Review