“Texas Was a Hot Bed:”

Theatre, Citizenship, and Prairie View A&M University, 1921—1970

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It is with great seriousness that attorney Charisse R. Lillie remembers her experiences of live performance as a junior high and high school student in 1960s Texas. Even then, she knew she wanted to be a lawyer, but she understood theatre as a way to prepare herself, not only for the law but also the larger world. For her, Texas was, as the article’s title suggests, “a hot bed” due to the potential for “making change...through the arts, that arts was a vehicle for education and... to both educate folks in the Black community as well as educate the broader community about what our capacity was.”[1] Even as a teenager, Lillie understood that her work made an argument not only for her immediate community but also for those who believed Black people were not deserving of equal inclusion in the educational, judicial, social, political, and economic structures of the state. Lillie’s ability to have the experiences she did was largely due to the efforts of those who had been working since the nineteenth century to ensure educational opportunities for Black Texans, despite the barriers the state and its White citizens strived to erect and maintain.

In 1912, the two Texas educational contest organizations merged and became the University Interscholastic League (UIL). The newly founded group included only sports and debate, but its goal was lofty. As the 1913 constitution stated, the UIL was founded to “aid in the preparation for citizenship.”[2] Roy Bedichek, the longest-serving director of the UIL, argued that “competition is a universal method of instructing the young in the skills necessary in adult life.”[3] Educators at the time believed rivalry was inevitable, so education was responsible for regulating and ensuring competition had appropriate goals and was conducted in a fair manner.

[1] Charisse R. Lillie, “The HistoryMakers A2002.185,” interviewed by Larry Crowe, *The HistoryMakers Digital Archive*, September 9, 2002, Tape 1, Story 8.

[2] University of Texas, “Constitution and Rules for County, District, and State Contests in Debate, Declamation, Spelling, Essay-Writing, and Athletics,” *Constitution and Rules of the Interscholastic League Division of Extension* 28, no. 274 (April 5, 1913): Image 4, HathiTrust.

[3] Roy Bedichek, *Educational Competition: The Story of the University Interscholastic League of Texas*, (University of Texas Press, 1956), 7.

UIL still thrives in Texas and its constitution, now in its 115th version, continues to emphasize that "competitions organized and administered by educators, without interference from outside interest groups, have provided a useful channel for the energies and talents of the state's finest public school students."[4] From 1919 to the mid-1960s, however, UIL defined competition and citizenship more by exclusion than inclusion. "Preparation for citizenship"[5] could only be accessed by some. The Interscholastic League of Colored Schools (also known as the Texas Interscholastic League of Colored Schools or TLICS) was established in 1921. There had been an informal attempt for Black schools to compete in the UIL, but as historian Dennal Hill Elmore notes, the experience was "ill-defined and very unsatisfactory."[6] The new organization was placed under the auspices of the most prominent HBCU in Texas, Prairie View Normal and Industrial College (which by 1973 became part of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas system and reclassified as a university— Texas A&M), making it the second oldest institution of higher education in the state of Texas. Ultimately named the Prairie View Interscholastic League, or PVIL as it became known, the league served the Black community of Texas until 1970 when it was integrated back into the UIL.[7]

The PVIL was no less invested in citizenship than the UIL, even though the PVIL lacked the guarantees and privileges that UIL afforded its students. The stakes for the PVIL participants were so much higher and involved so much more risk than for those participating in the UIL. The high rates of White racial violence were an ever-present threat to Black citizens, including students and teachers. Those threats did not restrain Black citizens from claiming their place in the democracy. Performance scholar Koritha Mitchell posits the category of "homemade citizenship," that is based on "a deep sense of success and belonging that does not depend on civic inclusion or mainstream recognition."[8] It is "the lens of achievement, rather than protest"[9] where homemade citizenship is best identified. PVIL theatre competitions, known as the one-act play contest, based in the preeminent state HBCU, were an essential place where Black Texans collaborated on, defined, and represented citizenship for each other to focus on, as Mitchell emphasizes, community affirmation and the creation of possibilities for the future. A close examination of the PVIL's founding and the rules, material, and experiences of the one-act play

[4] University of Texas, "Constitution and Contest Rules of the University Interscholastic League 2024—2025," *University Interscholastic League*, 115th ed., 2024, 12.

[5] University of Texas, "Constitution and Rules for County," Image 4.

[6] Dennal Hill Elmore, "The History of the Texas Interscholastic League of Colored Schools," (MA Thesis, Prairie View A&M University, 1985), 7.

[7] Ibid., 12.

[8] Koritha Mitchell, *From Slave Cabins to the White House: Homemade Citizenship in African American Culture*. (University of Illinois Press, 2021), 3.

[9] Ibid.

contest will demonstrate how Black Texans constructed themselves as citizens through performance not simply in resistance to white supremacy, but as an expression of belonging and potential.

Collective Excellence: The PVIL

When asked what the mission of the Prairie View Interscholastic League (PVIL) had been, Dr. George Woolfolk, history professor at Prairie View Normal and Industrial College and PVIL director of literary and music competitions, offered a definition that went beyond educational competition and focused instead on a mission that included the community as a whole. "The black league was set up to act as a motivator of collective excellence in literary and athletic events"[10] The emphasis on the collective was a fundamental component of how Black people in the US worked within an education system that, as historian Clif Stratton argues, "situated children along multiple unequal paths to 'good citizenship.' These paths both reflected and created broader institutional patterns of subordination and exclusion at work in American society—patterns intimately tied to hierarchies of race."[11] Performance as a category of competition through the PVIL provided opportunities not only for all involved to deploy "excellence,"[12] as Woolfolk understood it, but to destabilize both through action and embodiment the system predicated on preserving "unequal paths"[13] by demonstrating its inherent deceit.

It took the University Interscholastic League (UIL) six years to figure out how to shape their rules to advantage some Texas citizens over others and protect and maintain the inequities of segregation. The first UIL Constitution designates any student as eligible for its competitions. "Any public or private school...may become a member of this league by payment of the membership fee...."[14] In 1918, the UIL limited membership to public schools only, most likely because public funds supported them, but also because they needed to control the League's size.[15] The pre-UIL leagues included twenty-eight schools in 1911, but seven years later, they had 2275 members.[16] As it grew, the UIL wanted to limit participation to those it wanted to

[10] Elmore, *The History of the Texas Interscholastic League of Colored Schools*, 109.

[11] Clif Stratton, *Education for Empire: American Schools, Race, and the Paths of Good Citizenship* (University of California Press, 2016), 1.

[12] Elmore, *The History of the Texas Interscholastic League of Colored Schools*, 109.

[13] Stratton, *Education for Empire*, 1.

[14] "Constitution and Rules for County," 9.

[15] University of Texas, "University Interscholastic League Constitution and Rules for County, District, and State Contests in Debate, Declamation, Spelling, Essay Writing, and Athletics," *Constitution and Rules of the Interscholastic League Division of Extension*, no. 1830 (1918): 7.

[16] Ibid., 7.

advantage. In 1919, they defined the most important exclusion: "Any public white school in Texas...is eligible to membership for this League."[17] The language remained in the UIL Constitution until 1965. The rules published in the 1919 Constitution, and untouched for forty-six years, demonstrate how enforcing segregation—maintaining white supremacy—was a constant effort that relied on unending and iterative labor. There was nothing passive about keeping the US separate and unequal. It was an active commitment by millions of White citizens who rarely, if ever, seriously challenged the privileges segregation granted them.

Texas enthusiastically held up segregation after the Supreme Court confirmed its legality in 1896. Texas had long been determined to deny Citizens of Color any state-funded benefits. In its 1866 State Constitution, Texas limited educational spending to "the white scholastic inhabitants of this State."[18] Forced by the Reconstruction Act of 1870 to make education available for all, the 1876 constitution revised the education article. "Separate schools shall be provided for the white and colored children, and impartial provision shall be made for both."[19] The provisions were anything but impartial, and for the next seventy-plus years (until forced by a series of Supreme Court decisions in the mid-1940s to begin dismantling the segregation of education), Texas did all it could to deny its Black citizens access to quality education.[20] UIL embraced segregation and did almost nothing to ensure that Black students had access to the competitions deemed so vital as preparation for citizenship.

The fortitude and courage it took to create the PVIL, and then maintain it for over fifty years, cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the greater context in which the work occurred. Segregation, defined as "equal but separate,"[21] was, as historian Vernon McDaniel dubbed it, a "statutory myth."[22] The phrase sounds benign, but only when viewed in isolation from how it was enforced.[23] The banal phrase obscures what historian Monica Muñoz Martinez

[17] University of Texas, "University Interscholastic League Constitution and Rules for County, District, and State Contests in Debate, Declamation, Extempore Speaking, Spelling, Essay Writing, and Athletics," *Constitution and Rules of the Interscholastic League Division of Extension*, no. 1930 (1919): 12.

[18] "Article X: Education," *Constitution of the State of Texas 1866*, Section 2.

[19] "Article VII: Education-The Public Free Schools," *Constitution of the State of Texas 1876*, Section 7.

[20] David A. Williams, *Bricks Without Straw: A Comprehensive History of African Americans in Texas*, (Eakin Press, 1997), 212. Sweatt v. Painter (1946—50) and McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (1948—50), were the two cases that started the national movement to dismantle segregation. The Sweatt case is particularly germane here as Heman Marion Sweatt sued for admission to the University of Texas School of Law.

[21] Vernon McDaniel, *History of the Teachers State Association of Texas* (National Education Association, 1977), 28.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

describes as the "exploitation, dehumanization, and violent policing"[24] required to maintain inequality. The state had a "national reputation for lawlessness and violence,"[25] to the point where lynchings became "recreational..., a visual exhibition of the sociopolitical reordering and economic transformation intrinsic to post-emancipation Texas,"[26] as historian Terry Anne Scott's work has demonstrated.

During most of the time the PVIL operated, there was, on average, about one lynching per month in Texas, and many of them happened within a day's travel from Prairie View Normal and Industrial College. In his history of PVIL football, Michael Hurd emphasizes that the PVIL was founded when the events of the 1917 Camp Logan Mutiny and Houston Riots were still reverberating.[27] Less than an hour from Prairie View, the all-Black 24th Infantry Regiment, often called "Buffalo Soldiers,"[28] was stationed at Camp Logan, on the outskirts of Houston. After enduring unceasing violence from the Houston police, the soldiers fought back. Sixteen people died in the confrontation, the Army immediately tried 110 soldiers (the largest murder trial in US history), and hastily executed thirteen men (eventually that number rose to nineteen), the largest mass execution in US Army history.[29] The unjustly convicted men would not be exonerated until 2023.[30] The teachers, students, and administrators that made up the PVIL would have been aware of the risks they were taking and the environment in which they did their work. But as Mitchell emphasizes, community and self-affirmation did not mean Black citizens ignored reactionary white violence.[31] Instead, they created and collaborated despite it.

That PVIL existed at all is remarkable, and it was entirely due to thoughtful and strategic Black leadership in Texas. Since the late nineteenth century, the Colored Teachers State Association of Texas (CTSAT) had been connecting Black teachers with one another and

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[24] Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 26.

[25] Terry Anne Scott, *Lynching and Leisure: Race and the Transformation of Mob Violence in Texas* (University of Arkansas Press, 2022), 11.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Michael Hurd, *Thursday Night Lights: The Story of Black High School Football in Texas* (University of Texas Press, 2017), 5.

[28] Ibid.

[29] See Jaime Salazar's *Mutiny of Rage: The 1917 Camp Logan Riots and Buffalo Soldiers* (Prometheus, 2021).

[30] Michael Levenson, "Army Overturns Convictions of 110 Black Soldiers Charged in 1917 Riot," *New York Times*, November 13, 2023. Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth's statement declared "After a thorough review, the Board has found that these Soldiers were wrongly treated because of their race and were not given fair trials.... By setting aside their convictions and granting honorable discharges, the Army is acknowledging past mistakes and setting the record straight." All 110 soldiers had their status changed to "honorable."

[31] Mitchell, *From Slave Cabins to the White House*, 3.

supporting their professional goals. Historian Amilcar Shabazz credits the organization with being where "black intellectual warriors against white supremacy planted the seeds of the modern civil rights movement in Texas."[32] The CTSAT was founded in 1884 at Prairie View Normal and Industrial College, which, in all its incarnations across the twentieth century, would serve as the heart for Black activism in Texas.[33] Over the next fifty-plus years, nine CTSAT presidents would come from Prairie View.[34] Hurd observed that when it came to Black education, "much of the driving force for those struggles originated from the all-black former plantation community of Prairie View.[35] Scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois collaborated on a 1901 study of Black education in the South that declared: "We are today *deliberately rearing millions of our citizens in ignorance* and at the same time limiting the rights of citizenship by educational qualifications. *This is unjust*."[36] That clarion call was already being addressed in Texas by CTSAT.

In the 1930s, educator, activist, and historian Ira B. Bryant (also a CTSAT and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People or NAACP member) created an extended outline of Black history for high school teachers, as well as one on civics, and used them himself at Phillis Wheatley High School in Houston. Bryant, his predecessors, and successors in Texas practiced what education scholar Jarvis R. Givens later termed "fugitive pedagogy,"[37] defined as when the "physical and intellectual acts by black teachers and students explicitly critiqued and negated white supremacy and antiblack protocols of domination, but they often did so in discreet or partially concealed fashion."[38] In other words, fugitive pedagogy was one of the practices that constructed homemade citizenship. The PVIL's emphasis on excellence, citizenship, and preparation for democracy was not a mimicry of UIL language. While the

[32] Amilcar Shabazz, *Advancing Democracy: African Americans and the Struggle for Access and Equity in Higher Education in Texas* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 17.

[33] McDaniel, *History of the Teachers State Association of Texas,* 14.

[34] Michael Fultz, "Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Dissolution of Black State Teachers Associations, 1954–1970," in *The SAGE Handbook of African American Education*, ed. Linda C. Tillman (Sage, 2008), 69.

[35] Hurd, *Thursday Night Lights,* 24. Hurd is referring to the fact that the land for Prairie View had been Alta Vista Plantation, bought by the state in 1879 as the home for the state-supported college for Black Texans and already chartered in 1876 as Alta Vista Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas for Colored Youth. When the college took possession of the grounds the legislature renamed the institution Prairie View State Normal School. In 1899 the state changed the name to Prairie View State Normal & Industrial College. See George Ruble Woolfolk's *Prairie View: A Study in Public Conscience 1878—1946.*

[36] W. E. B. Du Bois, E. Penney, and T. J. Bell, *Negro Common School* (Atlanta University Press, 1901). xiv. The italics are notes in the original text.

[37] Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Harvard University Press, 2021), 5.

[38] Ibid.

organization may have used the same words, it did so not to identify with the White organization. Instead, the PVIL was about empowering the Black community and creating citizenship for it in Texas.

It was the CTSAT that ensured that Black students in Texas had access to educational competition in sports, literature and performance, and a host of other academic endeavors. Before 1921, UIL ran competitions at all schools, including Black schools. Few schools participated, and those that did got little guidance about how to do so effectively. Under pressure from the CTSAT, UIL asked the Director of the Negro School Division of the (Texas) State Department of Education, L.W. Rogers, to organize state-wide high school competitions for Black students. Rogers turned to the CTSAT. A committee was convened in March 1921 in Austin to finalize the league's structure, composition, and rules. The UIL was the template for the new league, and there were, on paper at least, few differences between the two.[39]

Despite being underfunded and disregarded, the new organization's leaders, participants, and supporters were determined to see it thrive. Just one month after the Austin meeting, students from around fifteen counties arrived on the Prairie View campus to compete in declamation, spelling, and athletics. The first gathering was also used as an opportunity to plan for future years. The UIL subsequently ignored the league. The PVIL's survival and success did not depend on the UIL. Instead, it flourished because Black Texans invested heavily in the PVIL, and that support guaranteed its existence.

The PVIL was born out of exclusion and inequality and was seen by the state as "a throwaway league of unvalued schools,"[40] as historian Michael Hurd commented. Its impact, however, far exceeded those limiting circumstances. The students, teachers, parents, and administrators who participated in it embraced the PVIL as an opportunity to expand educational opportunities, connect people across the state, and construct democratic citizenship. Students remembered their participation with joy and triumph. PVIL allowed Billye Aaron, who would work in television and serve as a regional vice president of the United Negro College Fund, to embrace poetry and writing. His memories are about the pride he felt and the joy he took in competing. "Loved it.... Loved reciting it.... I competed within the Interscholastic League... and I won the junior declaiming contest at Prairie View College...competing against kids—black kids all over the State of Texas...."[41] The arts would be a central focus of the PVIL. Although, like at

[39] Elmore, *The History of the Texas Interscholastic League of Colored Schools*, 8.

[40] Hurd, *Thursday Night Lights,* 23.

[41] Billye Aaron, "The HistoryMakers A2016.065," interviewed by Larry Crowe, *The HistoryMakers Digital Archive*, October 1, 2016, Tape 1, Story 10.

UIL, sports would dominate. Students could compete in band, declamation, and, by the end of the 1920s, theatre. Although a later addition, theatre would prove enduring and popular.

No Losers: PVIL One-Act Play Contest

The 1955 Rules and Regulations governing the PVIL provided eight reasons why the one-act play contest was valuable. The reasons ranged from encouraging rivalry and competition to the pleasures to be found in and through live performance. Threaded through the list was the message that the contest was not for "the sole purpose of winning a trophy"[42] or "to win at any cost."[43] The eighth reason summed up the philosophy: "There are no losers in a One-Act Play contest because the advantages which accrue from participation far outweigh the mere winning or losing of a contest.[44] This kind of rhetoric can be found in the documents of both leagues. For the PVIL, those words had a different meaning. Given the context of segregation opportunity in Texas, the importance of connection and community was paramount.

It is not clear when exactly the PVIL added theatre as one of its competitions. There is a strong indication, however, that it was not until the early 1950s, but there is no archival evidence to support that supposition.[45] The PVIL archive is uneven and has huge gaps, even for the more popular activities like football. The archival silences speak as much about the racist context in which the PVIL operated as do the surviving records. Part of what motivated Hurd's book on PVIL football was that "much of that history had been destroyed when black schools closed in the transition to integration," and he wanted to ensure that the PVIL's accomplishments persist in Texas memory.[46] Prarie View A&M Head of Special Collections and Archives and University Archivist, Phyllis Earles, remembers parts of the PVIL archive being discarded in the 1980s because the materials were deemed unimportant.[47] Piecing together the history of how the PVIL

[42] O. J. Thomas, *Rules and Regulations for the District and State Contests of Texas Interscholastic League of Colored Schools* (Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1955), 43—44.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Thomas, *Rules and Regulations*, 44.

[45] Elmore states that when O. J. Thomas, educator and administrator, became head of the PVIL in 1951 (Thomas served from 1951 to 1965) he added theatre. Elmore states, "Under the directorship of Mr. Thomas, the League continued to expand and improve, as evidenced by the inclusion of new contests.... New contests which were added included...one-act plays." See page 10 of Thomas's *Rules and Regulations for the District and State*. Elmore had access to many of those who had led and competed in the PVIL so this is very likely an accurate account.

[46] Hurd, *Thursday Night Lights,* 8.

[47] Phyllis Earles, Personal conversation with the author, December 19, 2019.

served Texas' Black community is all the more important to ensure that what records that have survived are given the respect and preservation they deserve.

The PVIL one-act play contest's criteria differed little from the UIL, and both leagues urged the judges to focus on evaluating student work. The emphasis was on student labor, especially acting and staging. "The cast is not to be penalized in the final ranking because the play may not have, in the opinion of the judge, sufficient literary merit."[48] The most significant emphasis was on acting, which judges were urged to weigh at 55% of the score. Directing and stage mechanics, which included both artistic and technical work, were given some emphasis with 35% of the overall score. Judges were not supposed to use the percentages as actual scores but more as guidelines for their decisions.

The choice of play was not insignificant. Even if the guidelines urged judges not to focus on it, and the PVIL used the same official list of dramas as the UIL. The reasons for this are not clear; perhaps the PVIL did not have the resources to review and recommend plays. There are typically over a hundred plays in the UIL list, and the labor that created the list was considerable, such that educators had to pay twenty-five cents for the *One-Act Play Handbook* that covered the rules and the approved titles. Certainly, the PVIL administrators could not rely on publishers like Samuel French to provide access to many Black playwrights. There was certainly no dearth of possible texts, but they were not published in the same numbers as plays by White authors. Access to Black playwrights was not simply a challenge for educators in Texas, it was a challenge across the country.

Declamation was included from the start of the PVIL and allowed students to see their own experiences represented in the texts they were allowed to use. Students competing in that contest were offered various sources for selecting pieces. Among the seventeen texts they could choose from were suggested *Negro Orators and Their Orations* (1925), *Readings from Negro Authors for Schools and Colleges* (1931), *Negro Poets and their Poems* (1923), and *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922). Students could attend the events to see the work of other schools. They would have only seen the theatre work of White playwrights who wrote White characters that were then performed by Black bodies. When students (and others) watched the declamation contests they were offered something quite different: Black authors representing Black experience voiced and personified by Black bodies. PVIL became a site to embrace one's identity while simultaneously refusing the limitations of segregation.

[48] Thomas, *Rules and Regulations for the District and State Contests*, 49.

That the reliance on the UIL list meant that Black students were performing White roles written by White authors did not pass unnoticed by the students. Vernell Lillie was a director and founder of Pittsburgh's Kuntu Repertory Theatre, as well as Charisse R. Lillie's mother. She spoke in 2008 of her UIL experiences in the 1950s as ones marked by a love of performance while at the same time ignoring the texts they were performing. "Accidentally, my first cousin was, was acting..., but I just happened to drop by one Sunday and the next thing I know I'm Becky Thatcher in [*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*]."[49] This struck the interviewer as intriguing, and he asked her about doing a Black version of *Tom Sawyer.* She cut him off and corrected: "No, no, no, we didn't do black versions.... There was no black versions. We did the literature just as it was written... We...did very little black literature."[50] Lillie may have accepted performing Becky Thatcher at the time, but the dissonance stayed with her.

Inhabiting a character that ignores, at best, or negates, at worst, the actor's experiences has far-reaching implications. These can be inhibiting, as perhaps was the state's intention, or they can be generative. Koritha Mitchell frames her work on homemade citizenship through performance theory because it "recogniz[es] the power of embodied practices,"[51] which encourages a focus not on "identity," but on "the activities through which besieged communities cultivate success and belonging."[52] Lillie demonstrates that the difference between identity, who she knew or was learning to be, and the public practices in which she was engaged was an important one. Ultimately, she would use one to change the other and turn away from the demands of realism that so defined theatre in official state events.

The PVIL guidelines, like those from the UIL, stress the importance of realistic embodiment of the character by the actor. The judge is asked: "Was there a complete bodily and mental recreation of the character by the actor? Did we 'believe' the actor's characterization all the time he [sic] was on stage? (This point, Characterization, is a very important one.)"[53] The implications of this are troubling. Lillie's example, although it is not clear if the production was for PVIL or not, suggests that Black actors were encouraged to engage in racial impersonation during PVIL performances. Conversely, it might indicate that students were encouraged to make the play their own and interpret its demands in their own way. The one-act play contest likely served as a site of fugitive pedagogy, as "the concept...holds in place both the realities of

[49] Vernell Lillie, "The HistoryMakers A2008.108," interviewed by Larry Crowe, *The HistoryMakers Digital Archive*, August 15, 2008, Tape 3, Story 3.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Mitchell, *From Slave Cabins to the White House,* 4.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Thomas, *Rules and Regulations for the District and State Contests,* 48.

constraint *and* [sic] black Americans' constant straining against said confinement."[54] The challenge for scholars seeking to document the work of fugitivity lies in the fact that these efforts were intentionally fleeting and transitory. The "straining" can be evident in the inclusion of Black authors when possible and in the realization of the students that they had limited access to the works of Black artists and dramatists.

The fugitive pedagogy practiced by Ira B. Bryant, who had taught in the 1930s at the same high school Lillie attended in the 1950s, had its limits. Looking back Lillie felt angry that she and her peers had not been introduced to more Black literature. She stated:

> There was only one black writer in the textbook as a poet, and that was Gwendolyn Brooks... and then there was one short story by Booker T. Washington, and what I don't understand is that all of these teachers had done their undergraduate days at all-black schools and in some of them, had been in school with the likes of a Langston Hughes or with those who had been at Lincoln [University], and there were never any references, you know.[55]

Lillie would go on to be a leading theatre educator and artistic director. Her Pittsburgh company would give a then-unknown playwright, August Wilson, some of his earliest productions.

Lillie documented her trajectory away from the literary canon forced on her by a white supremacist educational system to one that reflected the rich depth and breadth of Black literature. Before leaving Houston for Pittsburgh, she taught at her alma mater, Phillis Wheatley High School, from 1956 to 1969. In the early 1960s, she was teaching Black dramatic literature but had yet to direct. A student challenged her during the 1964—65 school year, "'why don't you do a black play?' I must have read twenty-five plays and the last one I picked up was guess what, *Day of Absence*...and *Happy Ending*..., so that was my absolutely first black play that I produced.... Douglas Turner Ward, and I have never since turned back."[56] She never directly said so, but her actions across her career speak to someone invested in making possible the accomplishments she knew were possible, despite what she experienced in her childhood and early career.

As Vernell Lillie was shifting her repertoire away from the state's literary canon, the PVIL was ending. The UIL announced that, beginning in the 1967-68 academic year, it would be open to all public schools in Texas. The PVIL attempted to operate despite integration, but its

[54] Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy,* 15.

[55] Vernell Lillie, The HistoryMakers A2008.108," interviewed by Larry Crowe, *The HistoryMakers Digital Archive*, August 15, 2008, Tape 5, Story 8.

[56] Ibid.

membership was shrinking, and in 1970, the league was formally disbanded. The changes from 1966 to 1970 were less a merger than "a takeover,"[57] Hurd argues. These previously all-White schools now had a vast expanded roster of talented students to put into competition.[58] The impact on the Black educational community was intense. Schools were closed, teachers and coaches were left unemployed, and communities were devastated by the loss of the institutions that had been at the core of their identity. The PVIL was not the only organization lost; in 1966, the CTSAT dissolved, and its members joined the Texas State Teacher's Association.[59]

PVIL may no longer exist as an organization, but it is a crucial place of esteem and memory of empowerment for those who participated. The PVIL Coaches Association (PVILCA) preserved many of the sports records and, in 2005, worked with UIL to place the PVIL statistics into the official record.[60] The motto of the PVILCA is "remembering the past with pride," [61] and for the participants, the memories are incredibly empowering. Vernell Lillie knows that her experiences in competition helped her critique the education Texas provided her and inspired her to do differently. For her, the education she received was also a comment on democracy and citizenship. "We were, we had such ultimate faith in American democracy that that's the only way I can put it. In some ways, I wonder if African Americans really, had really accepted the fact that their writings were of lessor value…., I mean how dare somebody deny me Langston Hughes at that point in time. Or…deny me Frederick Douglass…."[62] Lillie found ways to translate anger into action and joy. Her homemade citizenship transformed US theatre and education.

Theatre was integral to these larger efforts around citizenship and democracy. As both the Lillies testify, creating and sharing theatre with others empowered them. Koritha Mitchell emphasizes the role the arts play in the construction of homemade citizenship. Across US history "black artists and activists consistently placed a spotlight in their community's domestic successes,"[63] as a constant reminder of how inaccurate the mainstream representations that all too often licensed terrorism against Black people were. If Texas was a "hot bed," as Charisse Lille remembered, for theatre and "making change," it was because of Black schools and HBCUs in Texas, particularly Prairie View A&M University. These institutions, each in their own way, were evidence of Black Texas citizenship and, at the same time, the places where it could be born

[57] Hurd, *Thursday Night Lights*, 177.
[58] Ibid.
[59] McDaniel, *History of the Teachers State Association of Texas*, 81.
[60] "Records," *Prairie View Interscholastic League Coaches Association*.
[61] "Welcome," *Prairie View Interscholastic League Coaches Association.*
[62] Vernell Lillie, "The HistoryMakers A2008.108," Tape 3, Story 3.
[63] Mitchell, *From Slave Cabins to the White House,* 27.

and nurtured. They remain resolute in their historic mission to serve the Black community as it continues to define citizenship and democracy into the twenty-first century.

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