

THEATRE AS EMERGENCY TREATMENT PROMOTING SOCIAL JUSTICE:  
AN EXAMINATION OF DANIEL BEATY'S WORK IN THE CONTEXT OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

By

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Acknowledgements</b> .....   | <b>i</b>   |
| <b>Introduction</b> .....   | <b>1</b>   |
| <b>Chapter 1: Voices of the Past: The Whispers of Social Change</b> .....                 | <b>7</b>   |
| Murmurs of a Movement .....   | 12         |
| Declaring The Black Arts Movement .....   | 13         |
| Hansberry as Breakthrough Artist .....  | 15         |
| Amiri Baraka’s <i>Dutchman</i> as Disruptor ..  | 22         |
| Ntozake Shange’s <i>colored girls</i> Speak Out .....                                     | 27         |
| Batten Down the Hatches and Fasten Your Shackles for a Ride with George C. Wolfe .....    | 31         |
| August Wilson as The Chronicler of the Century .....                                      | 34         |
| <b>Chapter 2: Daniel Beaty: “The Voice of a Movement that Needs to be Heard”</b> .....    | <b>42</b>  |
| Freedom and Bondage in <i>Emergency</i> .....   | 45         |
| Language in <i>Emergency</i> .....  | 52         |
| The Role of Poetry in <i>Emergency</i> .....  | 57         |
| Daniel Beaty Heals .....  | 63         |
| A Voice that Emboldens .....  | 66         |
| <b>Chapter 3: Contemporary Voices: Calls for Social Justice through Theatre</b> .....     | <b>70</b>  |
| Von Washington, Sr.: Sit Down, and Be Quiet: <i>Let the Brotha Talk</i> .....             | 70         |
| Tarrell Alvin McCraney: Don’t Short <i>The Brothers Size</i> .....                        | 77         |
| Katori Hall Calls out from <i>The Mountaintop</i> .....                                   | 83         |
| Dominique Morisseau’s <i>Detroit ’67</i> : A Different Kind of Anniversary .....          | 89         |
| Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’ <i>Sick Bay</i> as <i>War Zone</i> .....                          | 93         |
| <b>Conclusion: Theatre as a Synergetic Sanctuary</b> .....                                | <b>101</b> |
| <b>Works Cited</b> .....  | <b>103</b> |
| <b>Appendices</b> .....   | <b>109</b> |
| Appendix A: Timeline of Seminal Plays by African American Playwrights .....               | 110        |
| Appendix B: A Timeline of African Americans Writing as It Pertains to Theatre .....       | 112        |
| Appendix C: <i>Emergency</i> media release, Festival Playhouse of Kalamazoo College ..... | 115        |
| Appendix D: <i>Emergency</i> program, Festival Playhouse of Kalamazoo College .....       | 117        |

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**By Laura Livingstone-McNelis**

It took a year-and-a-half or more for a member of the faculty in the Department of Theatre Arts at Kalamazoo College to wrangle the staging of *Emergency* written and performed by Daniel Beaty as part of the College's Guest Artist Series for the 53<sup>rd</sup> season of Festival Playhouse. As the one responsible for writing the media release for the piece, it seemed important to speak directly to Beaty. What was it that so impressed Dr. Ed Menta that he would work so hard to bring Beaty to campus? Why Beaty? Why here? Why now? Given the demands on his time, I had almost no hope Beaty would reply to my request for an interview, let alone grant the time for one. While we did not speak on the phone as hoped, he offered a compromise: send the questions, and he'd reply as time permitted. Fair enough.

Questions were sent, answers came back, and I began to understand the draw that Menta felt for this artist. The night came for Beaty's performance, and I sat in the house, mesmerized as Beaty transformed himself from one character to the next flawlessly, seamlessly, dramatically. With nothing other than a chair and the bare stage, Beaty took us on a trip through Manhattan to the harbor where we heard the voices of the past, the tones of the present. Our travels extended through our imaginations into the future.

This gift of hope, in the face of a horrific history of slavery in this nation, resonated with my own strong sense that we as human beings *must* try—we must endeavor to improve the current political and social climate if we are ever to achieve our potential as a country. As a white female born in Detroit only months before the 1967 riots and later growing up witnessing impoverished children of all ethnicities struggle in school, noticing the segregated neighborhoods

when we drove back into Detroit each week to visit my grandparents, defending the “nerd” being bullied at the bus stop, assisting family members with disabilities contend with personal issues in public, I developed compassion for those who are most vulnerable and for those who have been oppressed. Living as an adult in Kalamazoo, MI, a city where many artists and community leaders weave the theme of social justice into their work, I feel increasingly compelled to do what I am able in order to promote such aims for those less privileged than myself. Inspiration has manifested itself through a wide variety of sources in my lifetime, including last year via an interview with Daniel Beaty, and, as luck would have it, from an unanticipated conversation with him following the performance of his play, *Emergency*.

This African American man, quite possibly the descendant of slaves, believes in hope; he believes in the “universality of all people”—he believes in giving others—white “others”—the opportunity to address the past, acknowledge its effects on the present, and the chance to move forward together into the future. Beaty offers this gift without accusation, anger, despair, or condemnation. Rather, he offers it with kindness, grace, and compassion for all people—including those who are white—and with the acknowledgement of the pain that our nation’s history has inflicted upon the consciousness and unconsciousness of each. He presents the opportunity to heal, to grow, and to embrace each other’s humanity. This is why I am so very grateful for his performance, his words, his guidance, and his example—and it is with these things in mind that I provide a close reading of the text of his play, *Emergency*. The play will be treated as one providing an important voice, a writing which is part of a pivotal collection of dramatic works addressing social justice in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, a catalyst providing a way forward through pain, and ultimately, a chorus all of us are welcome to join as we transform our country with the anthem, “Let freedom ring **for all.**”

Through the vehicles of storytelling and poetry within the play (indeed several poem-stories exist within the text), Beaty opens the door to *The Opportunity for Healing*. It is specifically through language that Beaty holds his power over us as an audience, and uses this power to aid us in seeing the emerging possibility of a healed nation. Of paramount importance is understanding how he acquired this language. Given his childhood, growing up with not only an absent but incarcerated father, an addicted older brother, and a mother who worked long hours as a social worker to provide for her family, the odds were against him. Yet today, Beaty is a celebrity: a child who might have been labeled “at risk” intentionally and with great determination transformed his life into that of an internationally renowned artist whose mission is to heal the lives of others. An examination of this metamorphosis is critical to appreciating the significance of Beaty’s play, *Emergency* and will be shared in chapter two.

Through his exquisite language, Beaty exerts influence, readily capturing the attention of readers, publishers, directors, producers, audiences, critics. How does he employ this power, and why does he wield it this way? Beaty is a socially conscious person who clearly desires to use his skills to improve the lives of others. One might consider it social work through theatre. Through this art form, he reaches the multitudes, and through *Emergency*, he increases the urgency with which we should address what is arguably one of our greatest curses as a nation: the legacy of slavery. Live theatre provides a forum for the instantaneous transmittal of a message with no barriers, no impediments. The immediacy of the message can be palpable to the point of penetrating one’s consciousness deeply. As a space, the theatre provides the forum for this kind of intense communication which is so necessary to support the distinct message. The spirit of community within the theatre at such a moment as when Beaty delivers “Knock Knock” can transform the experience from art that entertains to art that educates, transforms, and even

inspires.

Theatre has long been used as a tool to achieve great things—beginning with Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides, who wrote, for example, to convey heroic virtues to the masses and therefore addressed themes of law and order, justice, free will, religion, war. According to Robert Brustein, founder of the Yale Repertory Theatre, Strindberg, Chekhov, Brecht and others used theatre as a tool for revolt, making theatre about and for the people—but not all people. They could not, of course, being that they were a product of their own times. But these are all white men—and they are not the subject of this paper. Among the first African American playwrights to receive wide acclaim was Lorraine Hansberry, author of *A Raisin in the Sun*, the title inspired by a line from Langston Hughes’ poem, “A Dream Deferred.” Her play, produced on Broadway in 1959, marked the first time a black playwright had an all-black cast perform the play (the only exception being the one minor white character portrayed by a white). That this playwright was a woman was of even greater significance. In *Raisin*, Hansberry tells the story of a family struggling to leave their apartment and move to a “decent neighborhood” albeit one whose residents were unwelcoming white folks.

August Wilson’s *Pittsburgh Cycle*, also known as the *Century Cycle*, encompasses social concerns of the black community over the course of the entire twentieth century. Beginning with *Gem of the Ocean* set in the 1900s, and concluding with *Radio Golf* set in the 1990s, Wilson tackles issues of home ownership as did Hansberry, as well as boundaries, power, gentrification, faith, and the weighty, yet frequently unacknowledged history of slavery that impacts America today.

There are others such as Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, James Baldwin, Ntozake Shange and Samm-Art Williams, George C. Wolfe, and Suzan-Lori Parks, who also contributed

significant works and moved the African American perspective to center stage, sowing the seeds of social activism through theatre even further. While the scope of this paper cannot address all of these authors, selections were made in an effort to suggest an arc of thematic development, with contemporaries of Daniel Beaty— Von Washington, Sr., Tarrell Alvin McCraney, Katori Hall, Dominique Morisseau, and Branden Jaobs-Jenkins—providing further context.

In *Emergency*, Beaty features a vast number of characters—in contrast to the relatively modest cast size of previously mentioned plays featuring fewer than ten characters. The sheer number of voices on stage, representing a wide array of backgrounds—and predominantly black—sets this play apart. While Hansberry focuses on the Younger family, and Wilson’s plays included here generally feature a central family and a few associates, Beaty relays the story of one family while simultaneously sharing the stories of several others as well. Furthermore, he divulges the story of America’s past and present then suggests a very different future than what many are inclined to imagine possible.

It is clear that Beaty has a mission that involves using theatre to promote social change through increased awareness and empowerment. Holding a belief that each person has the potential to promote change, he recognizes that first we must imagine that transformation is in fact possible. Beaty greatly aids us in that belief through his writing as well as his performance of this play, originally titled *Emergen-SEE!* Regardless of one’s background, reading or (better yet) witnessing a performance of *Emergency* forces important issues onto the theatrical and even national stage and into one’s consciousness.

Finally, Beaty is a community activist. Not only has he written a book for children, *Knock Knock*, based on the poem in *Emergency* by the same title, he takes his work into the schools and to the youth in a variety of locales. In Beaty, these young people see someone like



themselves—an energetic, intelligent, inspired, passionate person, who, despite socioeconomic and familial challenges, rose up through the arts of theatre, writing, music, and performance to deliver a powerful message: the time has come for social justice in this country and we all must play a role in that transformation. Indeed, his voice resonates with many—and speaks well for a great many more. It is through his work at this level—as well as on the national stage—that Beaty is truly an agent for social justice and, therefore, is one to watch in the years to come: he is becoming part of the canon of great African American playwrights and therefore a force in American theatre at large.

In this paper, the roots of African American theatre are traced up to Beaty situating his plays amongst his predecessors and his contemporaries. It will become apparent that he stands on the shoulders of others, and in doing so, is that much closer to reaching the stars above. Daniel Beaty, the innovative playwright, artist, author, and social activist, has emerged as a leader in the effort to heal our nation from the wounds inflicted by the institution of slavery and its residual effects as evidenced in policy and racial incidents of the past and which continue today. Beaty's effort to connect with children as well as adult audiences across the country underscores his belief in the value of introducing children to African American leaders of all professions as this can have a profound impact on their self-concept, life choices, and society at large. Furthermore, Beaty pushes past socio-economic boundaries by taking his work into schools where students can witness the work regardless of their family income.

This paper is an exploration of African American playwrights and selected works in an attempt to trace the progress these artists have made to initiate real dialog about racism in the United States with a particular focus on how Daniel Beaty's work affects the social justice movement on multiple levels.

# CHAPTER 1

## VOICES OF THE PAST: THE WHISPERS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

African American theatre evolved from African storytelling. In West African societies, the role of the griot was traditionally given to a man by birthright—and according to Bakary Koita interviewed by John James for the Goethe Institute of Johannesburg, griots were their own social caste: “You can’t make yourself become a griot. You’re born that way. Being a griot is an art. You’re born with it, and you need to exercise it any moment” (Koita as qtd. by James). So important is the function of the griot that the tradition has continued for more than seven centuries with its roots in the Malink Empire which stretched from what is now the country of Senegal to Timbuktu, Gao, Mali, to areas as far as that of the Ivory Coast.

The most important role of the griot is to preserve the culture’s history by memorizing it verbatim. “These people are told the history of the Tribes, under oath never to alter, add or subtract any word. Anyone who so much as thought of changing any of the stories of his tribe that he had been told fell immediately under a High Curse which covered him, his children, and his children’s children. These tribal storytellers (griots) were called (by the Bantu) Guardians of the Umlando or, the Tribal History,” states Gerene L. Freeman, a teacher contributor to the Teachers Institute at Yale University.

Griots listen to the master griots’ stories, often traveling to other regions and even other countries to gather in groups to learn from one another, and becoming apprentices to hone their skills. Today there are state sponsored schools to teach the art of the griot, and these are open to both men and women: no longer must one be born into the caste to study this art (Keita).

In order to truly preserve the history of a tribe, griots relied on audience participation which in turn engaged the audience and helped them to remember their history. In many stories

there is a call and response technique employed where the storyteller literally invites the audience to sing along, answer a question, repeat a phrase or provide sound effects. Storytelling preserves the cultural heritage and is truly a communal event, which is in contrast to European plays where the audience generally remains passive. In fact, some Nigerian tribes require years of rehearsal within the village to develop and refine a seven-hour performance (Freeman).

While men (griots) still focus primarily on the spoken word to tell their stories, women (griottes) focus primarily on praise through song (Keita). Four instruments are important to the art of African storytelling: the kora (which resembles the harp), the balafon (a wooden instrument similar to a xylophone), the ngoni (lute) and the voice itself. As technology has interfaced with storytelling, there are those who consider themselves griots whose medium is not that of the live storyteller. One Senegalese film director, Djibril Diop Mambéty explains, “[T]he word griot . . . is the word for what I do and the role that the filmmaker has in society . . . the griot is a messenger of one’s time, a visionary and the creator for the future” (James).

Freeman notes that actual African indigenous dramas, however, are difficult to trace as they “evolved out of an oral tradition, long before many African societies had developed a written alphabet.” He goes on to state that though there are not many, two African indigenous dramas are known to be published, both of which were brief comic sketches. The significance of comedy in African theatre will be addressed later in this paper. Freeman continues,

In indigenous African societies no distinction is made between ritual and drama . . . . Mythology suggests that the spirits and or ancestors created the performance and simply permit people to imitate them. Additionally, it implies that the performances are not presented for the entertainment of mere mortals but possibly to entertain and/or

appease the spirits and/or ancestors.

The ancestral world is certainly present in the works of August Wilson, Daniel Beaty, Katori Hill, and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins as will be discussed in the chapters that follow.

According to the authors of the Digital Scholarship Lab of the University of Richmond, the performers of indigenous African drama often kept their identities secret. Masks were used but due to issues of audibility, translators were sometimes required to repeat the actors' lines for the sake of audience understanding. This in turn resulted in abbreviated and fewer lines spoken in these dramas as compared to those of modern and contemporary African American playwrights who not only seldom use masks but sometimes write lengthy monologues into their plays.

Though many Africans were forced to leave their homeland and become slaves in America, storytelling continued, and music, which has always been part of African culture, took on additional meanings playing a key role in the psychological as well as physical survival of a people forced to live lives full of cruelty, deprivation, and abuse. It was also "used to boost the morale of their fellow workers," according to the authors of the Digital Scholarship Lab of the University of Richmond. "Slaves would break out in a song to pass the time, and lift their spirits . . . [and] would often sing songs that praised the lord, or asked the lord for help and guidance." But more significantly for the slaves as a whole is the fact that they deliberately "put codes into songs to relay secret messages among their slave community." One in particular, "'Wade in the Water,' specifically explains to runaways how to escape from bloodhounds" while the widely recognized song, "Follow the Drinking Gourd" is actually a verbal map directing slaves toward Canada (Digital Scholarship Lab).

At about the same time, minstrelsy became popular in America with the "father of

American minstrelsy” being Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice. In 1828, Rice started a theatre in New York City, and through his performance imitating a black slave whose character was based upon a folktale figure named Jim Crow, began the tradition of blackface minstrel shows. Rooted in the traveling circus, Irish dance and African music rhythms, the unique performance caught people’s attention both in America and in England, writes Ken Padgett, author of “Blackface! Minstrel Shows.”

While the early acts were performed by whites in black makeup, by the 1840s, blacks were also participating in the shows. One of the earliest was William Henry Lane, inventor of tap dancing and whose stage name was Master Juba. Though blacks became part of this tradition, little changed to erase the stereotypes whites held of blacks (Padgett). Following President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, and specifically after 1870, the popularity of minstrel shows began to decline, although some high schools, fraternities, and local community theatres continued to do them as recently as the 1960s. It was not until 1978 that “The Black and White Minstrel Show” was cancelled by the British Broadcasting Company (Padgett), which interestingly, loosely correlated with the emergence of hip hop and rap. The connections to these genres are too vast to explore here, but suffice to say that one performing artist, Akala, created an entire piece tracing African storytelling through minstrelsy to modern hip hop and rap music as described in the article by Joe Collin, “Akala: ‘Hip-hop is Modern Day Minstrel Show.’”

Organized by William Brown, the first formal African American theatre troupe, the African Company, performed in the African Globe Theatre in New York City in 1820. In their first season, they primarily produced plays by Shakespeare with Ira Aldridge as the first black Shakespearean actor who later moved to Europe and continued his professional acting career where he received top billing at London’s Boburg Theatre for his role Ornooko in *A Slaves’*

*Revenge*. James Brown wrote *The Drama of King Shotaway* (1823) which is now believed to be the first play written and performed by an African American (Wilson and Goldfarb), while William Wells Brown's *The Escape: or, A Leap For Freedom* (1858) was the first written by a black person to be published (Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica). Due to "several white rowdies," the African Globe Theatre was forced to close in 1827 (Wilson and Goldfarb).

Wilson and Goldfarb state that the choices for blacks to be involved in American theatre after the African Grove Theatre shut its doors were only four in number: they could be amateur performers and let professional work go, they could be servants ("darkies") in white companies, or they could leave America and perform with European companies which focused on a classical repertoire. There was also the possibility of being one of the three kings in Christmas pageants. "During the English Renaissance, in plays like Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Titus Andronicus*, the black man (a Moor) often appeared as a heroic figure. But by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the noble king was replaced by the slave and the loyal 'darkie' servant. Othello became Step 'N' Fetchit, a slow, lazy, dim witted, comic servant" (Wilson and Goldfarb). Daniel Beaty distinctly reverses this tradition in his play, *Emergency* (2006), in which a black king is the one who saves a father and his sons by teaching them to remember history and forge new paths, thereby returning the black male to the role of hero.

Eventually, some black theatre artists challenged the negative stereotypes played out in minstrel shows. In the first few years of the twentieth century, Bert Williams and George Walker, and Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson wrote musical comedies that countered the traditional images whites held of blacks, according to Anthony H. Hill and Douglas Q. Barnett, authors of the *Historical Dictionary of African American Theater*. Using humor to overcome oppression has proven to be an effective tool for black theatre artists throughout the ages.

## Murmurs of a Movement

With the end of World War I, the year 1919 marked a pronounced transition. The Great Migration had begun and blacks were leaving the South in significant numbers. Many whites continued to disrespect and distrust blacks, leading to horrific acts: seventy-four blacks were lynched in that year alone. Riots broke out in several cities across the country in what piteously became known as Red Summer. In response, Claude McKay wrote the poem, "If We Must Die," which is credited with helping launch what would come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance (Freeman).

During the Harlem Renaissance, generally recognized as the period from 1920-1939, many black community theatres opened across the country, including the Ethiopian Art Theatre, which launched Paul Robeson's career as the premier black actor in America. During this same era, Garland Anderson's play *Appearances* (1925) was the first play to be produced on Broadway by a black playwright. The first black playwright to garner a hit on Broadway was Langston Hughes with his show, *Mulatto* (1935). Considering the title, the central theme in this play is not surprisingly one of identity: why can't the son of a white plantation owner and his negro mistress use the front door to the big house, the very home in which he resides? Apparently with the aim of increasing ticket sales, the producer Martin Jones, altered Hughes' plot significantly, and even added a scene where the daughter of this same couple is raped by Talbot, the plantation's overseer, after she misses the train north to secretarial school; critics viewed this as a betrayal of Hughes' tragedy and an unjust reinforcement of the stereotype of blacks' bestial nature and tensions within the black culture according to the text's editor Leslie Catherine Sanders (17).

Despite the successes of these playwrights, Marcus Garvey, founder of Universal Negro

Improvement Association, suggested that since people of African origin would never truly be free or receive justice in America, it would be best if they simply returned to Africa, their mother country. While his efforts were cut short by his own imprisonment due to mail fraud, he did manage to get artists thinking about alternative approaches to improve the lives of blacks (Freeman).

During the Harlem Renaissance, wealthy patrons of the arts would sometimes sponsor an artist or writer allowing that individual to further hone his/her craft. One such beneficiary was Langston Hughes, but when Hughes realized his patron was interested in directing his writing, he ended the contract (Freeman). With his hands untied, Hughes wrote the play, *Don't You Want To Be Free* (1938). The full title reveals something more of his style: *Don't You Want to Be Free? From Slavery Through The Blues to Now—And Then Some! With Singing, Music and Dancing*. Described as an agitprop play styled after some he'd seen in Russia, the play was meant to encourage people to remember—and change—society. What is especially significant about Hughes' play, however, is that he continued to revise it through 1963 as he recorded changes in history in its pages. Freeman notes that “*Don't You Want To Be Free?* is an exceptionally fine example of the playwright as a griot.” This play was, in a real way, a living document, recording history as it unfolded.

### **Declaring The Black Arts Movement**

The next decade marked a shift in Black American Theatre and is defined by Woodie King, Jr., in his documentary, *Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*, in which he illustrates the connections between the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements. The documentary outlines the development of black American theatre through a series of interviews with notable African



American theatre artists including Actor Ossie Davis, who notes that “In the early ’40s, there were community theatres in Harlem because there was nothing in the motion pictures we wanted to see.” In the same documentary, Lloyd Richards, director of the Broadway production of *A Raisin in the Sun*, adds, “Very few shows had anything to do with black lives.”

Richard Wesley, playwright and contemporary of Davis and Richards, commented that “We could write plays about the human experience in the black community, and if we were true to those experiences, that depiction of our humanity would transcend any cultural or racial barriers” (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*). At least for Wesley, the goal was not to exclude white experience; rather, it was to emphasize the commonalities. By writing plays that gave life to meritorious characters as Hansberry did in *Raisin*, white audiences would come to understand black people’s concerns better and ideally begin to move through if not beyond racism.

Wesley summarizes the Black Arts Theater Movement this way: “You can take the entire body of work that has been written by black playwrights and put them in chronological order which practically gives you a complete panoramic history of the theatre which then gives you a timeline of the evolution of black consciousness in America since 1960.” While some pose the question, does Art imitate Life, or does Life imitate Art, the world of theatre appears to answer this way: theatre reflects the times and the issues relevant to playwrights’ lives and the people with whom they concern themselves. When not meant purely for entertainment, theatre is a social-political tool. It is an agent for social change. African American theatre artists have recognized this and used this art form to exercise their voice, which, over time, is becoming louder, clearer, and more frequently heard across the country as will be addressed in chapter three.

Davis notes that for a while, blacks were popular: “Richard Wright’s *Native Son* was published [in 1940]. [T]hings got a little black—but in the 50s, the Cold War came, and black became less popular once again.” Lloyd Richards adds that, “The black theatre in the 50s into the McCarthy Era was a theatre protest basically. The theatre has for black theatre people been a way of protesting the circumstances within which we attempt to exist in this country” (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*).

The idea of theatre as a tool for protest links black theatre artists across the centuries. In the following pages, it will become apparent how the writing techniques, styles and some themes of various theatre artists have led to Daniel Beaty’s work as an African American male playwright-artist-activist. Prior to that discussion, however, it is important to consider each artist in his/her own right. The early pioneers, as King suggests, were those who initiated the transformation on a broader public platform than that of their predecessors. While Langston Hughes produced a play on Broadway and was indeed a talented and prolific writer, there was no greater transforming artist in this period than Lorraine Hansberry.

### **Hansberry as Breakthrough Artist**

Director Lloyd Richards celebrates Lorraine Hansberry as being the first black woman playwright to have a play produced on Broadway, *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on March 11, 1959 which later earned her the Pulitzer Prize. That also made him the first black director of a Broadway production. In Richard’s words, “I met Lorraine Hansberry, and for anybody who has never done that, you missed a very important thing. Certainly in the area of theatre. I don’t even mean black theatre, just theatre. The mind, the person. A very theatrical human being who thought, and cared, and was very concerned. I had the marvelous pleasure of doing her first

Broadway play” (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*).

Not only is *A Raisin in the Sun* a strong piece of literature, but its focus is on a black, working-class family—and that family’s struggles living in a white dominated society. Given that the expectations in the 1950s was for women was to be at home cooking and cleaning, Hansberry’s success on Broadway—as a woman—as a black woman—was nothing short of ground breaking. Hansberry certainly did clean up the house: the audience packed the Ethel Barrymore Theatre making *Raisin* an historical and iconic production in American theatre by all standards, not only in Black American theatre.

*Raisin* tells the story of the Youngers, a family who recently lost their patriarch. Lena “Mama” Younger has inherited a \$10,000 life insurance policy which she must now decide how best to use for her family. Her heart is set on moving out of their dilapidated apartment and into a home of their own albeit in a racist white neighborhood. This was, in fact, based on Hansberry’s own experience: her parents were determined to stay in their home in a white neighborhood. According to Lindsay Champion, author of “The Evolution of *A Raisin in the Sun*,” the family’s case went to the Illinois Supreme Court where they lost the case before it was ultimately upheld in the U.S. Supreme Court. Hansberry later recalled how her mother used to patrol the house at night with a loaded gun in order to protect her four children.

In the play, each of the three primary characters desperately hope to achieve something substantial. Their competing interests unveil the reasons for their choices: Mama wants to own something, to be independent and free. Her daughter, Beneatha “Bennie” Younger, longs to obtain her education and believes this will be her liberation, allowing her to travel, teach, and leave the ghetto.

Hansberry’s focus on the value of education as a means of traversing deeply entrenched

societal expectations is echoed by Yale Institute contributor Freeman who underscores Bennie's position with his students. "I believe it is important to impress upon the students that one of the methods utilized to maintain the African's status as a slave was to withhold education. This is a good opportunity to discuss with them how important it is for them to get an education so that they may be a productive, self-reliant member of society as opposed to being dependent and vulnerable to it." Hansberry herself certainly held this view, and wrote an entire character into her play supporting this perspective.

The third primary character, Mama's son, Walter Lee Younger, desires independent work where he is his own boss, not taking orders from anyone and can leave the subservient life of the chauffeur behind. Yet he does not see education as the key to his future. In a bitter exchange with George Murchison, Beneatha's date, Walter says,

What the hell you learning over there? Filling up your heads . . . with the sociology and the psychology—but they teaching you how to be a man? How to take over and run the world? They teaching you how to run a rubber plantation or a steel mill? Naw—just to talk proper and read books and wear white shoes. (Hansberry, *Raisin* 127)

All of these characters wish to *own* something, and while they pursue different paths, the fundamental desire is the same: freedom. The play, through its depiction of a typical family living ordinary lives, illustrates how family members work to improve their lives, struggling to do so, despite their best efforts. Their challenges emanate from the racism each faces which, among other instances, manifests itself in attitudes of white neighborhood associations, members of which actually offer to buy out the Younger family and pay them for not moving into their white neighborhood.

Walter Lee, ashamed that he lost the family's inheritance in a business venture to start his own liquor store, actually considers accepting the bribe. He brags to Mama,

WALTER: [I] called him [Lindner, the representative of the white neighborhood association] to come on over to the show. Gonna put on a show for the man. [Earlier,] [w]e told the man to get out. Oh, we was some proud folks this afternoon, yeah...we were still full of that old time stuff . . .

RUTH (*coming toward him slowly*): You talking 'bout taking them people's money to keep us from moving in that house?

WALTER: I ain't just talking 'bout it baby—I'm telling you that's what's going to happen . . . .

MAMA: You making something inside me cry, son. Some awful pain inside me . . . .

BENEATHA: Well—we are dead now . . . . That is not a man. That's nothing but a toothless rat. (143-44)

Ultimately, Lindner arrives and Walter finds his voice once more.

WALTER: Well, Mr. Lindner. (*BENEATHA turns away.*) We called you—(*there is a profound, simple groping quality in his speech*)—because, well, me and my family (*he looks around and shifts from one foot to the other*) Well—we are very plain people . . . I mean—we are very proud people. And that's my sister over there and she's going to be a doctor—and we are very proud— . . . we have all thought about your offer and we have decided to move into our house because my father—my father—he earned it. (*MAMA has*

*her eyes closed and is rocking back and forth as though she were in church, with her head nodding the amen yes).* (145)

Mama's son took a stand for the family and thereby stood up against racism, restoring his mother's pride in him and renewing her determination to make life in their new home a blessing rather than a curse.

Productions of *Raisin* made a huge impression on Broadway with a run of 530 performances. The play won the New York Critics' Circle Award (1959) and eventually two Tony Awards (2004, 2014). One could argue it helped pave the way for the civil rights movement to gain momentum in the 1960s. Hansberry herself became active in 1963 with the Civil Rights Movement and even met Attorney General Robert Kennedy "to test his position on civil rights" (Biography.com Editors). Glynn Turman, who played Travis Younger and performed alongside Sidney Portier and Ruby Dee among others, recalls the effect of *Raisin* on family and friends: "I remember with a great deal of pride how people would talk about it at home after having seen the show. People were very proud" (*Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement*).

But there were those who felt that being accepted on Broadway was not enough; they believed it important to create a more comprehensive Afro-American culture in the United States. Maulana Karenga defined seven principles which he referred to as Kwanzaa, or "first fruits" in Swahili. Though this language is from Eastern Africa, the point was to create something of Pan-African heritage. The principles of unity, self-determination, collectivity, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith "provided the most sophisticated (and most usable) ideological scaffolding for the early visions of a mythic history advanced by [Amiri] Baraka" and others, writes James Edward Smethurst in his book, *The Black Arts Movement:*

*Literary nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s (79).*

Just as Garvey espoused that success as prescribed in America is not the veritable goal for all, Hansberry herself also seems to concede the merit of this perspective as evidenced by this scene from *Raisin*. Asagai, Beneatha's second date in the play, says,

ASAGAI: I have a bit of a suggestion.

BENEATHA: What?

ASAGAI (*rather quietly for him*): That when it is all over—that you come home with me—

BENEATHA (*slapping herself on the forehead with exasperation born of understanding*): Oh—Asagai—at this moment you decide to be romantic!

ASAGAI (*quickly understanding the misunderstanding*): My dear, young creature of the New World—I do not mean across the city—I mean across the ocean; home—to Africa. (141)

But Beneatha's home is a Chicago apartment until one day when her family will own a house. Crossing oceans is beyond her comprehension at this moment; it is enough to consider crossing the city to other neighborhoods.

In a discussion about her view of human potential for *Making of a Movement*, Hansberry says, "All of us are what our circumstances allow us to be. It really doesn't matter if you're talking about the oppressed or the oppressor . . . . The most ordinary human being has within him elements of great profundity." Among many attributes, it is the ability to see the profound in the common person that made Hansberry a signature writer of her time. Walter Lee, thanks to Hansberry, has come to represent the common man determined to overcome the great obstacles

in life and follow his dreams.

Hansberry herself passed away the same night as her second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, closed on Broadway. Since then, *Raisin* has been adapted for television, cinema, and has provided a catalyst for Phylicia Rashad to earn the Best Actress in a Play trophy, the first African American woman to do so. According to an article by Peter Marks for the *Washington Post*, Maryland's Center Stage produced what is being called *The Raisin Cycle*, a reference to August Wilson's *Century Cycle*: a constellation of *Clybourne Park* by Bruce Norris (2011), a play about gentrification; *Beneatha's Place* by Kwame Kwei-Armah (2013), the untold story of Walter Lee's sister; and of course, the original story, *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Interestingly, these plays offer a telescopic view into the future of Mama's home and its occupants, scoping across decades of social change, and not always for the betterment of society. In *Raisin*, the play features a home in Chicago, 1950s; *Clybourne Park's* focus is the gentrification of the area; and *Beneatha* considers the consequences of an African American Studies Department that no longer sees itself as relevant. Beatty offers something similar in his approach to New York City: the past being actively dismissed and therefore forgotten by Reginald, the father; the present life of his sons as they struggle to find their identities having no real cultural roots; and the future emerging from the past as Chief Kofi attempts to help those in the present find their way forward. The message that we must acknowledge past, present, and future to have a full understanding of our heritage offers an intriguing element to the parallel structures of *The Raisin Cycle* and of *Emergency*.

On her tombstone, Hansberry's words from the past speak to the present and will continue to do so in the future: "I care. I care about it all. It takes too much energy not to care. The why of why we are here is an intrigue for adolescents; the how is what must command the



living. Which is why I have lately become an insurgent again” (qtd. from *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* by Peter Marks in his article, “*Beneatha’s Place Adds to the Conversation*”). This in essence is a call to action, a plea from an artist-activist for each of us to care—and care enough to act.

### **Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman* as Disruptor**

Another playwright who proved to be a significant catalyst of the Black Theater Movement is Amiri Baraka, originally known as Leroi Jones. Baraka is actually considered the founder of the Black Arts and Black Theatre movements of the 1960s, according to James V. Hatch and Ted Shine, editors of *Black Theatre USA*. His play *Dutchman* (1964), also born out of the Civil Rights Movement, directly addresses the issue of white supremacy using the ultimate weapon, murder, to make his point.

In this story, a young and respectable black man, Clay, is harassed by a low-class white woman, Lula. Initially, Lula tries to coerce Clay—indeed mold him as though into an exotic art piece: she wants him to become the sexy African American man she imagines and eventually succeeds in seducing him. In their inverted power struggle, one can see the woman’s whiteness being wielded like a weapon until ultimately, she uses the power of her position to murder Clay, even going so far as to enlist the other passengers to help her dump his body out of the train and then exit at the next stop themselves. Once alone on the train, she marks something in her little notebook—presumably keeping tally of all the black men she has seduced and murdered. Next up: the young black boy who has just entered the train. The outward banality of the scene heightens the atrociousness of the content.

The play begins with Lula smiling at Clay from the train station platform, clearly

interested in him—and what he might be able to do for her. Once aboard, she stands over him until he takes notice.

LULA: Hello.

CLAY: Uh, hi're you?

LULA: I'm going to sit down . . . O.K.? (383)

She is highly assertive from the outset, and when a white woman behaves that way in that era, toward a black man, one immediately expects trouble—which indeed follows, and quickly. She is supremely confident in her whiteness, and tricks Clay into thinking she knows something of his history then blurts out, “I lie a lot. (*smiling*) It helps me control the world” (384). With this singular statement, Baraka points to the heinousness of American history: the lies that fill the history books have most certainly helped Caucasians control the world, and oppress those they wish to oppress, including millions in this country, most notably, people of color.

Amiri Baraka was not only a playwright but also served as a significant leader in the efforts to disrupt the status quo and thereby create a black American theatre and in so doing, liberate blacks. Baraka explains the intent behind the Civil Rights Movement as it intersected with the Black Liberation as well as the Black Theatre Movements:

We wanted our art more and more to reflect the black liberation movement itself, and say the things the black liberation movement was doing . . . . The Civil Rights Movement was over [after the assassination of Malcolm X]; people weren't going for non-violence or turn the other cheek, or we shall overcome; self defense was starting to really be impressed on people's minds . . . . Some of us had already conceived of Black Arts.

When they killed Malcolm X, we felt that it was a clear declaration of war (*Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement*).

Baraka explains the methodology of artist-activists in black theatre and how it served the greater good:

Summer '65 we put on plays on street corners; . . . music on one corner; play on another corner; art on another corner; poetry on another. These were plays written about what we were actually observing . . . about what the people were saying, what their struggle was . . . you create what it is the people are talking about, make it bigger than life, . . . you bring it back to them, so they understand that it is their ideas, and all you do is reorganize it so it actually gives them a voice with a much larger kind of impact (*Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement*).

Through direct observation and dialogue, the artists held the pulse of the people. It is this personal connection to the people themselves that makes artist-activists successful in their efforts to move ideas forward. Baraka continues with a discussion of the literary and political impact of *Dutchman*:

It was very interesting, because a man [Baraka himself] just won the Obie Award, and then when we took it the street, the congressman said it was racist. So we began to understand that when you try to take the art to the people, not just these little middle class suburbanites, then it becomes something else, a force (*Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement*).

He explains that “too often artists are so busy with their own subjective unrelated to everybody’s

objective reality . . . [L]ike Shakespeare laid out the history of England, . . . we have to lay out the history of this country . . . how it got to be this way and what it's going to take to change.” The making of a movement was difficult, and not nearly as clear cut as the founders originally thought:

We thought just because we're angry, and because we loved black people that was sufficient to make a revolution . . . . But the bourgeoisie scooped up the “black black black” that created something [and then said,] “[T]here [is] no black art”: we found out that they was the ones in charge of it (*Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement*).

Other artists were not entirely in agreement with Baraka's approach of emulating European style or format, including that of Shakespeare. They wanted to separate and define themselves from the white artists and patrons. Verna Dee, founder of the National Black Theatre (1968) says it “was designed to speak to the sensibilities of black people; not intended to imitate the European theatre . . . . We want it to be free rather than put a form on it so we cannot really express who we are . . . [so we] changed all the names from actor to liberator—more political, more arrogant” (*Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement*).

But with the innovative techniques and politicization of theatre came a backlash. Just as whites created a disturbance that shut down the African Globe Theater in 1827, the Free Southern Theatre suffered political attacks. “Twenty-five white citizens on a council said we were a communist group. The Free Southern Theatre wanted to be beyond and above the party line,” said Gil Moses, co-founder (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*).

Some organizations operated by whites supported the black theatre however, just as there were patrons who sponsored certain African American artists as had been the case for Langston

Hughes. According to Howard Klein, Director of Arts Programming for the Rockefeller Foundation,

[The Foundation] felt it was important for a theatre to exist in Harlem, a theatre of intensity, passion, perhaps a little too militant for some people, but . . . we saw people looking at themselves, we went into their homes . . . we realized the struggles of the black people we were not hearing from the black leaders; so the stimulation of black theatre, and especially the black writers was of tremendous importance because it provided that view of the black person as a human being which had for years been denied us . . . . One of the things I regret about black TV is that they revert to black stereotypes and in order for us and for the whole society to progress we have to know who we are and where we are going (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*).

But Nixon's administration negatively impacted the budgets of the black theatre. This, coupled with decreased Rockefeller funding, forced the New Lafayette Theater in Harlem to close, said Ed Bullins, playwright and member of the Black Arts Movement (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*) and the Black Culture's Minister in Culture at the time (BlackPast.org).

Though funds might have run short, energy fueling the Black American Theater Movement had not. Baraka founded the Black Arts Repertory/Theater School, which according to James Earl Jones, was "a program that I call a cultural expression, not just theatre . . . . That was short lived I think because ultimately you have to focus on the larger audience. You can make art by blacks but it has to be for the observing, listening audience at large." He adds that this must include white audiences. "[They were] NOT the common enemy but they were the common focus; mostly white, mostly guilt-ridden audience" (*Black Theater: The Making of a*

*Movement*).

Vinnette Carroll and others initiated yet another effort, The Urban Arts Corps. She describes it as “a place where black artists can come and develop and work on material they ordinarily cannot do in the commercial sector.” One of their initiatives was The Group Theatre Workshop in which participants produced skits, improvisations, one-act plays such as *The Happy Ending* and later *Day of Absence* by Douglas Turner Ward (1965), founder and artistic director of the Negro Ensemble Company (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*).

In 1967, the Ford Foundation expressed interest in funding a black culture event endorsing and subsidizing a project proposed, leading to the launch of the Negro Ensemble Company, which, in turn, produced the play *Kanni's Harvest* by Wole Soyinka that year. “The NEC trained blacks in every aspect of theatre. It raised the consciousness of the relevance and the existence of black theatre,” said Ward (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*). Consciousness-raising became the mission of another young woman playwright whose signature piece addresses existential extremes, from suicide to the contemplation of rainbows.

### **Ntozake Shange's *colored girls Speak Out***

To make black theatre truly relevant, women's stories needed telling as well. Ntozake Shange's play put feminism onstage with all-black characters, searing through conventional storytelling structures to present singular lives representing the life stories of many. Her play, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* (1975), was defined by Shange as a choreopoem telling the story of seven women dealing with feminist ideals in our patriarchal society. The play itself actually consists of a series of individual story-poems interspersed with prose and movement. These scenes sometimes include multiple characters, and

are sometimes monologues. The director of *for colored girls*, Joseph Papp, “was well-known due to his struggle for making Shakespeare’s work become accessible to the public as well as for establishing *The Public Theatre*” where Shange’s play was produced (Tellini 157). His support of her work was instrumental in catapulting her play forward to the front of public consciousness.

Born as Paulette Williams, Ntozake Shange, an activist in the Civil Rights Movement, renamed herself in an effort to “dissociate her identity from hegemonic white Anglo-Saxon culture,” writes Sylvia Mara Tellini, author of “Experimental Language” (156). According to Tellini, “Ntozake” means “she who comes with her own things,” and “Shange” signifies one “who walks like a lion” (156). The women in Shange’s play, though struggling in their lives with a variety of issues including segregation in the public sector and domination by men in the private sector, ultimately follow Shange’s footsteps as best they can. According to Tellini, “Her courage to expose some of the issues her society pretended were non-existent caused her some animosity amongst the most patriarchal Afro-Americans, who left the theatre amongst boos before the end of some of the performances” (157). Indeed, as she once shared in an interview, Shange realized that, upon seeing a rainbow one night as she drove home, women are entitled to survive because they “have as much right and as much purpose for being here as air and mountains do, . . . [and the rainbow symbolizes] the possibility to start all over again with the power and beauty of ourselves” (qtd. by Tellini 157). Like Hansberry before her, Shange believes in the integrity and dreams of individuals, and uses her skills as a playwright to address current social-political issues and, in so doing, put those issues on the stage and in the spotlight to be discussed by the public at large. Shange followed Hansberry’s footsteps to Broadway, and became the second African-American woman to have her work produced there, winning an Obie

Award among others. Commenting on the women whose lives she depicts in her play, Shange says simply, “I want a character that I will keep with me for the rest of my life” (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*).

Like the women in the play who confront their oppressors—whether that be the white society in which they live or the men who abuse them—Shange’s tone when speaking about her vocation is strong, self-assured. She compares the work of the artist to that of the plumber or the roofer: “I should not feel grateful to do what I do best” (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*). Her clear defense of the value of art, and the right of an artist to create that work—indeed, the very existence of Art as a vocation—reflects the magnitude of challenges that artists, especially black artists, faced in that era and continue to yet today.

Among some of the other relatively unique characteristics of *for colored girls* is that the characters do not have names. Instead, they are referenced by the color of their costume. There is Lady in Brown, who addresses the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Specifically, her poem “addresses the struggle of the ladies to be heard, to come out of silence and be born, which symbolized how difficult it is to be themselves in their society” (Tellini 160). Lady in Brown tells us,

I can't hear anything  
But maddening screams  
& the soft strains of death  
& you promised me  
you promised me . . .  
somebody/ anybody



sing a black girl's song

bring her out

to know herself

to know you (18)

She yearns to hear her song, to be connected to another, to know her Self.

Another character, Lady in Blue, tells her story of having an abortion. She is alone, and has told no one of her condition or her plan. Her experience frames her thinking as evidenced in an earlier scene where the women speak of rape.

*lady in blue*

a friend is hard to press charges against

*lady in red*

if you know him/ you must have wanted it

*lady in purple*

a misunderstanding

...

*lady in blue*

pressin charges will be as hard/ as keepin yr legs closed/ while five fools try to run a train  
on you . . . / bein betrayed by men who know us . . . / that we will submit. (31-33)

The fact that rape is usually a crime committed by someone the victim/survivor knows is now more widely accepted than it was in the 1970s, yet a fact that is not credited by all even today.

The women in *for colored girls* fight hard to be believed; they struggle to substantiate their stories while the deck is stacked against them. Later, when Lady in Blue remembers and relives

the horrific experience of having an abortion alone, unable to share her truth with anyone. The subject of abortion, like the perpetrator's responsibility for his crime, remains as controversial today as then, both with respect to religious beliefs as well as in regard to patriarchal society at large, with men positioned to greatly influence public policy—both in the religious and political sectors—and therefore it remains a given that they have much to say about a woman's body, her health, her rights, her opportunities, and therefore, her entire future.

When asked in an interview for *Black Women Writers* why more of her work was not a commercial success, Shange replied, “*for colored girls* doesn't have a point either, but they made a point of it. Those girls were people whom I cared about, people whom I offered to you for you to see and to know. Black and Latin writers have to start demanding that the fact that we're alive is point enough” (qtd. by Tellini 168). Shange has written many poems, plays, a novel and several essays and beginning in 1997, added children's books to her list of completed works. She now has written five such stories, the most recent ones being *Ellington Was Not a Street* (2003), *Daddy Says* (2003) and *Coretta Scott* (2009). While *for colored girls* is a serious piece with comedic moments, other plays use humor less sparingly and thereby underscore the ludicrousness of everything from identity to institutions. Just as the masks of tragedy and comedy juxtapose the scope of human experience, *for colored girls* and a play written a decade later, *The Colored Museum*, present the human capacity to acknowledge human tragedy while laughing at ourselves for creating the atrocities for which we later grieve for centuries to come.

### **Batten Down the Hatches and Fasten Your Shackles for**

#### **A Ride with George C. Wolfe**

Through humor, George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* (1987) provides levity while

directly addressing the issue of racism, inviting the unsuspecting audience to grapple with issues of slavery to less serious subjects such as hairstyles and sports. Engaging his audience in this manner, Wolfe does not permit his audience the choice to avoid an extremely difficult subject and likely subsequent dialogue.

Similar to Shange's *for colored girls*, Wolfe's play contains a series of eleven scenes each addressing different aspects of blackness in America. The play begins with Miss Pat, stewardess, announcing, "Git on board!" and "Fasten your shackles." We are simultaneously both spectators and slaves, and listen to her commentary with an ear for both historical and contemporary allusions. The perky attitude of Miss Pat declaring that we should put on our shackles rather than seatbelts on the *Celebrity Slaveship* is disarming—yet so ridiculous one must laugh at the utter absurdity of the situation. Like Baraka's understated use of tragic irony in *Dutchman*, Wolfe slips in lines that at once elicit our laughter as well as our shock at ourselves. Ruby Dee offers this perspective: "A philosophical relief (humor like religion) indigenous to our situation has allowed us to survive" (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*). This is the poignancy of the play: atrocious acts and attitudes are tempered with unexpected moments of humor, making the playwright's point all the more unforgettable.

Like the griot who engages his audience, Wolfe forces the audience to make connections between scenes. One scene offers light-hearted entertainment such as the one about black hair, while others are fantastical, as is the instance about a girl named Normal who believes she has laid an egg. He even pokes at Hansberry and Shange with his scene, "The Last Mama on the Couch Play," as Christina Knight describes it in her article "'Fasten Your Shackles,'" which appeared in the *African American Review*. By addressing black issues head on—but with humor—Wolfe continues the tradition of black writers such as "Frederick Douglass and Harriet

Jacobs [who] employed satire to lampoon racists . . .” but the playwright he most resembles, argues Knight, is that of 19<sup>th</sup> century William Wells Brown who actually uses derogatory stereotypes of blacks to make his point. Brown recognized that these stereotypes which demeaned his people could also be a means of disarming those who held or indeed still hold the stereotypes (Knight 356).

In her analysis of the play, Knight notes that Wolfe uses the mythology of the American Dream to address the disenfranchisement of blacks and the idea that the American Dream for blacks can only be had through outstanding athletic achievements most notably in the sport of basketball, linking the concept of the value people place upon one’s life. For blacks being shipped across the Middle Passage, they might be valued for what they could be sold for on the auction block once they reached the other side of the Atlantic, but they might actually be worth more dead than alive. Knight cites Ian Baucom as having explored the history of early days of insurance business. Baucom learned that the captain of the slave ship *Zong* actually threw more than one-hundred slaves overboard when he realized he could actually make more money doing so than selling them at an auction. Baucom notes that this is one of the earliest times when human life is associated so directly to a particular value in the insurance business (357-58). Examples which readily come to mind include Hansberry’s Walter Younger, Sr., who leaves his family a \$10,000 insurance policy—and of course, Arthur Miller’s Willy Loman, who learns he is worth more dead than alive.

Furthermore, Wolfe blurs the lines of the dead with those living (just as Wilson later does with Aunt Ester). “Wolfe’s exploration of the link between the present moment and the legacy of slavery engages his own historiographical moment’s interest in animating the perspectives of the dead by bringing them into conversation with contemporary ones,” writes Knight (358). She

continues, ultimately “Wolfe poses the question: to what degree can audiences imagine themselves in relation to slaves, particularly when our understandings of their experiences have always been mediated through historical texts and images?” Clearly this is something each individual who reads or sees *The Colored Museum* must determine for her-/himself. It is worth noting that the play has had mixed reactions with some African Americans actually refusing to attend a production (360); it might be that it is too easy to imagine themselves in relation to slaves and if so, perhaps this response also actually underscores Wolfe’s point that slavery’s legacy is still very much with us.

### **August Wilson as The Chronicler of The Century**

The man who epitomized the success of making black theater by and for black audiences and one of the greatest celebrities in African American theatre is the late August Wilson. Author of the famous *Century Cycle* (originally called the *Pittsburgh Cycle*—all the plays but one are set in Pittsburgh), Wilson decided he would write one play representative of the African American experience for each decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly, the plays were not written in sequence. *Gem of the Ocean*, for instance, was written in 2003 but set in the 1900s. *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, written in 1988, is set in the 1910s. He finished his last play, *Radio Golf*, set in the 1990s, just before his death in 2005.

More explicitly than his predecessors, Wilson combines historical elements to those of spiritual realm. For example, a motif used in both *Gem* and *Joe Turner* is traveling upriver to the land of the free, all suggesting spiritual freedom. A symbol of bondage transformed to become a symbol of power, chain links are another common symbol to many black writers: in *Gem of the Ocean*, Citizen announces he has Solly’s chain link which will bring him luck; in Richard

Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the protagonist is offered a chain link by Brother Tarp. These chains are both the literal links used to bind slaves as well as concrete reminders of their past and that fact that freedom can be earned but also taken away. Furthermore, the shackles represent the ability to overcome something as powerful as the institution of slavery. Washing oneself is another image that recurs in *Gem*. Citizen asks Black Mary, "You ever had your soul washed?" (42)—and in another instance in *Joe Turner*, Loomis slashes his chest and wipes his hands in his own blood while asking, "You clean with blood?" (85). Again, the themes of spirituality, religion and even resurrection are at play here along with the historical context of slaves being whipped until bloody, while the image of a bloody Jesus is held supreme as the ultimate martyr.

*Gem of the Ocean*, set at the turn of the century, portrays a people who have begun huge sociological, political and psychological transitions. The Emancipation Proclamation has been issued, and former slaves are trying to earn a livelihood, find family and friends long since separated by the cruelty of the auction block, while attempting at the same time to remember their heritage which had by and large been forced from consciousness for generations.

This is in fact one of the most significant obstacles African Americans face: their lost history. In *Gem*, Citizen Barlow knows nothing of his past and therefore cannot make sense of his life, says John Lahr, author of the introduction to the *Cycle*. According to Lahr, "Of the many impoverishments of the African American, perhaps the most pernicious is that this loss of the past left him no way to make sense of his present. In Wilson's cycle, this mutation of memory—a sort of chronic cultural amnesia—echoes down the decades" (xi). *Gem* tells the story of a man named Citizen who visits the 285-year-old Aunt Ester, known for setting people on their right paths by atoning for their sins, requires a visit the City of Bones underneath the ocean.

The crime of stealing a bucket of nails, actually committed by Citizen, was blamed upon

another man, who decided to choose death rather than live life falsely accused. “He did it for himself,” explains Ester to Citizen. “He say I’d rather die in truth than to live a lie” (47). The theme of standing up for one’s own convictions runs through all of the playwrights’ works discussed here, and speaks to their willingness to rebel against the status quo not for the sake of causing trouble as it would be characterized by oppressors but rather to make a point and thereby demonstrate integrity of all human beings.

This “gem of the ocean” which Ester says Citizen must visit to heal himself is constructed from the bones of slaves who died while being shipped across the Middle Passage. The city is beautiful, she says, made out of “[p]early white bones” (54). She refers to it as a “kingdom” where people’s “mouths are on fire with song. That water can’t put it out. That song is powerful” (55). Wilson speaks for all African Americans here, and specifically playwrights who will not have their fire “put out.” They will write the stories that need to be told which are indeed “powerful,” and will be told and retold until others listen and learn to both recognize and acknowledge the truth.

To transport Citizen, Ester gives him a piece of paper folded up to resemble a slave ship on which he must travel to the city.

AUNT ESTER: You ever seen a boat, Mr. Citizen? . . .

CITIZEN: It’s moving! The boat’s moving! I feel it moving! The land . . . it’s moving away (66-67).

. . .

CITIZEN: I hear people talking.

AUNT ESTER: What they saying, Mr. Citizen? Do you know what they saying?

CITIZEN: They saying remember me. . . . I see the people. They chained to the boat . . . . They all look like me. They all got my face! (*Citizen is terror-stricken to the point where he cannot breathe. Black Mary comes to his aid.*) . . .

AUNT ESTER: . . . All you have is your chain link . . . . Live, Mr. Citizen. Live to the fullest. You got a duty to life. So live, Mr. Citizen! Live! (69-71)

Through Ester's incantations and storytelling, Citizen finds himself at the bottom of the ocean. After confessing his guilt, his soul is cleansed and he is permitted to enter the City of Bones where he can see the people with their tongues on fire.

Solly Two Kings, who makes his living selling dog feces, doesn't see the point in discussing slave ships or even freedom at all. He counters that "The people think they in freedom. I say I got it but what is it? I'm still trying to find out. It ain't never been nothing but trouble . . . All it mean is you got a long row to hoe and ain't got no plow. Ain't got no seed. Ain't got no mule. What good is freedom if you can't do nothing with it?" (29) In a desperate attempt to be remembered as having existed at all, Solly explains why he went ahead and burned down the local mill: "I got older I see where I'm gonna die and everything gonna be the same. I say well at least goddamn it they gonna know I was here!" (79). Eli responds to Solly's subsequent murder by declaring that "Solly never did find his freedom. He always believed he was gonna find it. The battlefield is always bloody . . . . He lived in truth and he died in truth. He died on the battlefield. You live right you die right" (87).

Citizen eventually discovers that the paper ship is made from no ordinary piece of paper: it is in fact Ester's Bill of Sale from her day on the auction block. Presenting the audience with this moment of the ultimate irony—a man finding freedom from his hauntings through a



woman's documentation that she is merely property to be owned by whites—provides the opportunity for reflection on one's position in American society. Ester does so as she confronts the racist and cruel black officer who declares he has a warrant for her arrest for harboring a fugitive (Citizen), questioning the comparable value of two pieces of paper and their contents.

AUNT ESTER: I got a piece of paper too . . . . Tell me how much that piece of paper's worth, Mr. Caesar. (*Caesar reads the bill of sale.*) That's a Bill of Sale for Ester Tyler. That's me. Now you tell me how much it's worth, Mr. Caesar.

CAESAR: I wouldn't give you ten cents for it.

AUNT ESTER: Then how much you think your paper's worth? You see, Mr. Caesar, you can put the law on the paper but that don't make it right. That piece of paper say I was property. Say anybody could buy or sell me. The law say I needed a piece of paper to say I was a free woman. But I didn't need no piece of paper to tell me that. (81-82)

The papers are powerful both in their potential to convey deliverance, or, conversely, into the hands of another, bound to serve against one's will, or serve time, both at the expense of one's own liberty.

In Wilson's play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson's Bynum seems to live in the spiritual realm even more than he does in reality—though he uses his understanding of the spirit world to help others throughout the play. In contrast, Herald Loomis is haunted by “visions shaking his soul . . . . [Bynum] is the yin to Loomis' yang, and their turbulent interactions make up the heart of a play that holds fast to its truths in an uncompromising way,” writes Andrew Meacham, author of “Historic Artistry.” Bynum's primary focus is on encouraging others to find their songs. His own is the “Binding Song. I choose that song because that's what I seen most

when I was traveling . . . people walking away and leaving one another. So I takes the power of my song and binds them together” (16). This emphasis on music is part of the legacy of the African heritage and just as code songs led people to freedom, the songs in their plays—and their hearts—can do the same. The final scene is one in which Bynum binds Martha Loomis Pentecost to her daughter. She has done so with the assistance of her father Herald Loomis who later accuses Bynum of binding Loomis himself up. But Bynum tells him, “You can’t bind what don’t cling” (83). He continues, “I ain’t bound you. I bound the little girl to her mother . . . . You bound onto your song. All you got to do is stand up and sing it” (84). Like Herald who must take a stand and forge his own life’s path, Wilson encourages African Americans to stand up for themselves and determine their course moving forward in American culture because in essence the message is, no one is going to do it as well as you can if they do it at all.

The themes of fatherhood and fatherlessness are addressed both directly and indirectly in *Joe Turner*. Bynum tells Jeremy, a young resident at Seth Holly’s boardinghouse, that “Your mother was a woman. That’s enough right there to show you what woman is . . . She made something of you. Taught you converse, and all about how to take care of yourself, how to see where you at and where you going tomorrow . . . that’s a might thing she did” (45). There is no mention of Jeremy’s father in the play, but the role of parent is filled by the mother. Conversely, Bynum tells Loomis that he knows he has “done picked a bunch of cotton . . . . I can tell by looking at you. My daddy taught me that” (67).

The theme of familial roles is woven into *Gem* as Aunt Ester tells Citizen that she had lost everything, so named the stars after her missing children. When she looked for answers as to what happened to her family, she explains, “. . . but I didn’t have no answer. So I just started singing. Just singing quietly to myself some song my mother had taught me” (55).

In *Joe Turner*, the father teaches his son that a song was to be his vocation once discovered; in *Gem*, the mother shows her daughter how song can be a source of comfort, consoling one's soul in her greatest hours of sorrow. Both examples illustrate the role of song as salvation, just as spirituals lifted the spirits of the slaves so they might cope with the horrors of their daily lives, and code songs led some north to freedom.

In his final play, *Radio Golf*, Wilson addresses a more contemporary issue facing many predominantly African American neighborhoods today—that of gentrification. This play focuses on two shrewd business partners, Roosevelt and Harmond, whose interests become divided when one wants to proceed with demolishing an elderly man's house and the other realizes they have no right to do so. Ultimately, Harmond prepares to join the homeowner in repainting his house, an act of protest against corporate interests trumping those of the common man. The stage directions read, “(He discovers the paintbrush left on the desk. He takes off his coat and rolls up his sleeves. He picks up the paintbrush and exits. ‘Hail, Hail, the Gang’s All Here’ is heard as the lights go down on the scene)” (81).

August Wilson “gave back to black audiences the experience of themselves (and to white audiences, an understanding of that experience),” writes Lahr in his introduction to *Gem* (x). In Wilson's own words, when his daughter, Azula, asked him why he is a writer, he replied simply, “To tell the story” (ix).

The art of theatre is created through the efforts of many. It is created by playwrights, actors, directors, designers, producers, and by the audience. Anthony D. Hill and Douglas Q. Barnett, authors of the *Historical Dictionary of African American Theater*, claim that it is the most comprehensive dictionary on the subject as it encompasses all aspects rather than, for instance, a singular aspect of a particular era. They write, “African American Theatre is a vibrant

and unique entity enriched by ancient Egyptian rituals, West African folklore, and European theatrical practices. A continuum of African folk traditions, this theatre combines storytelling, mythology, rituals, music, song, and dance with ancestor worship from ancient times to the present. It has afforded black artists a cultural gold mine to celebrate what it has been like to be an African American in The New World.” The previous notes on plays by African American playwrights Hansberry, Baraka, Shange, Wolfe and Wilson clearly illustrate the truth of this description.

Following the notables described above is Daniel Beaty, a modern and highly innovative writer, actor, musician, and activist. Beaty stands on the shoulders of those who came before him, and weaves the threads of their innovations into his own in the latest era of black theatre, the stage of “Black Theater and Beyond” as Woodie King, Jr. refers to it. The following chapter focuses on Beaty’s play, *Emergency*, and highlights where his work connects with that of his predecessors, and where it steps beyond these lines. The final chapter explains how Beaty is unique even when compared to other cutting edge African American playwrights.

## CHAPTER 2

### DANIEL BEATY: “THE VOICE OF A MOVEMENT THAT NEEDS TO BE HEARD”

Daniel Beaty has established himself as an artist respected and sought after around the globe. He has sung in operas in Italy and spirituals at the gates of one of the most significant slave dungeons in West Africa for an international memorial. He serves as a motivational and as a keynote speaker for schools as well as professional organizations. He has established programs and written books and plays for youth. Author of numerous musicals and plays, it is no wonder that Ben Varen, actor, dancer, singer, describes him as “The voice of a Movement that needs to be heard” (Beaty.com). Indeed, he might even be considered the vanguard of theatre artists in the social justice movement.

Daniel Beaty began performing *Emergency* in 2006. In fact, it was during the run of this play that Beaty read a report by the Urban League, with a prologue written by then Candidate Barak Obama, writes Frank Rizzo of his interview with Beaty. The statistic that compelled Beaty to write his next play: one in three African American men will spend time in prison. In the mind of Beaty, the emergency which he spoke of on stage increased in urgency and culminated in yet another play, *Resurrection*, later retitled *Through the Night* and the companion play to *Emergency* (2010). Influenced by Shange’s *for colored girls*, Beaty tells the story of six men and a young boy who face health, parenting, business, and identity issues.

Beaty says the primary message in *Through the Night* is one of empowerment through a belief in one’s own potential. When Obama became president, the message became “we as the American people have the power to affect change and we have the choice to create the country and the world that we want. This play is very much about choice, about the individual's ability to

choose anew and to create a better world for themselves and for the future of their children” (Rizzo).

In *Emergency*, people in Manhattan witness a slave ship—*Remembrance*—emerging from the depths and anchoring in front of the Statue of Liberty. Beginning with the name of this vessel, Beaty invites—no, directs—our attention to the past. He calls upon us to remember and acknowledge that which came before even before the play begins. Like Langston Hughes who encouraged others to remember, Beaty underscores his ancestor’s intent by naming his ship *Remembrance*. As Keita writes, “A griot helps keep the past alive by remembering and articulating it for others. A griot sings, praises, celebrates, announces, as well as many other things, but most of all, a griot remembers.” Beaty is most certainly a modern day griot; after all, the reporter in the play announces, “We are live at Liberty Island with this breaking news report. A slave ship has just risen out of the Hudson River in front of the Statue of Liberty” (13). Unlike Mr. Citizen who must travel to the depths of the ocean to see the bones of his ancestors and recall their forced passage, one cannot help but see Beaty’s ship as it presents itself front and center in front of America’s most iconic statue.

The very idea of a slave ship rising out of the water suggests several connections to Beaty’s predecessors in the African American playwright legacy. Two obvious examples are Amiri Baraka’s *Slave Ship* (1970), and Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean*. But the fantastical image of an ancient ship appearing suddenly indicates a liaison to another world, something akin to that of Aunt Ester in *Gem* and Bynum in *Joe Turner*. Such a spectacle of course invites people of all walks of life to witness the event. The wide array of reactions from the crowd paints a complicated picture of slavery as viewed by different members of the African American community.

There are the Pissed Off Negroes (PON) who arrive armed and ready to “[s]hoot anybody who tries to move ’dis ship! What?!” (13). There is the host of America’s Next Top Poet. There are reporters interviewing everyone present. Ashes is a transsexual girl who “thought this was the new Carnival Cruise!” (13) echoing the *Celebrity Slaveship* of Wolfe’s *The Colored Museum*. There is a grandmother and with her are two ten-year-old children—a boy who sings in a choir and a girl inflicted with AIDS. A homeless man comes and goes, begging for spare change from a slave-ologist. A businessman intentionally ignores the past and focuses exclusively on the future. Then there are the three primary characters, all men from one family but with very different identities: Reginald, widower and former Shakespearean scholar and professor; Rodney, his son the poet; and Freddie, his gay son. The men struggle to communicate with one another after the family matriarch is randomly murdered by a young black man. With such a cast, there is someone with whom almost everyone might identify. Through this opening scene, Beaty illuminates the parameters of the play. It will be a story with some recognizable characters, with customary and familiar modes of communication—sound bites for news reports, poetry for the competition—ultimately comprising a script within which angry but loving, desperate yet hopeful voices will be heard.

The play’s structure provides a variety of perspectives as the story is told from the city’s citizens as well as from the members of a small family. The lens through which the audience views the action is a kind of hybrid between the telescope and the microscope: the telescope offering a view of the broad cross-section of people who comment on the ship, and the microscope focusing on the individual stories of not only the three men of the Johnson family, but the specific stories of several other community members. Characters are at once speaking for themselves and speaking for many others.

The reporter trained in objectivity recognizes the scene as it is and understands “the big picture.” While amidst the throngs of spectators who are growing increasingly vocal in their views, somewhere “Oprah is calling this slave ship a ‘full circle ‘a ha’ moment,” and the reporter announces, “Liberty is in a state of emergency” (24).

This is Beaty’s message and why he chooses to do the work he does. Indeed, his website lists him as an actor, singer, writer, activist. Quotations appear at the bottom of the screen: Stevie Wonder describes Beaty’s artistic voice saying, “His words are like music.” Sidney Portier writes, “The most thrilling evening I’ve ever had in the theater.” *The New York Times* is quoted describing Beaty as “A commanding presence . . . a voice powerful enough to suggest the near-legendary richness of Paul Robeson.” Beaty trained in opera at the American Conservatory of Theatre after receiving a degree with honors in English and music at Yale University—and with this strongly musical voice, speaks compassionately about—and to—the world’s most vulnerable.

### **Freedom and Bondage in *Emergency***

Beaty begins with the idea that our very liberty in this country is in jeopardy based on current mindsets rooted in dangerous historical references and inferences leading to what have become, in some cases, highly destructive political and social policies. If the country is in need of help, what are we to do? Rather than despair over our circumstances, Beaty encourages us to hope, sharing the words of Paul Robeson: “The Artist must elect to fight for freedom or for slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative” (qtd. by Beaty, *Transforming Pain to Power* 1). Beaty adds,

My entire life has been a journey to get free—to escape the chains that have kept me



bound . . . . Somewhere along my journey I discovered that the only possibility I could ever have of getting free and of maintaining that freedom was to inspire that possibility in others. And somewhere along the journey I discovered that our deepest pain is often the path to our highest purpose. There is power in our pain. (11-12)

Through hope for a better society, Beaty encourages us to mend the wounds of the past as well as those due to the impacts of current policies. As the character “Negro” in a poem in the play says, “Without me there is no you” (*Emergency* 36). Beaty’s message is crystal clear: we need one another. Blacks and whites, people of all backgrounds, gender identities, goals and lifestyles. Beaty offers a message of acceptance that becomes active support, and in so doing, he provides a path forward.

But we cannot travel forward until we have examined the past, including the chains that tie us to the very depths of human cruelty, to some of the darkest places humanity has gone. The themes of bondage and freedom, pain and healing are apparent throughout the play and inform both the conscious and unconscious minds of Beaty’s characters. In a scene in which Rodney drives toward the harbor, he is stopped by a police officer. Rodney imagines that, instead of withdrawing his identification to show the officer, he pulls out a gun and “BANG! You don’t know me.” The issue of gun violence and the issue of police brutality stand side by side in this scene with the line “You don’t know me” repeated over and over again. We do not know Rodney—not yet in this play, and not in real life. He is the faceless and generic image of a black man in America who stops being passive and who becomes violent in an effort to take a stand and become a face, reminiscent of Solly who sets the mill on fire—“I say well at least goddamn it they gonna know I was here!” (*Gem* 79) and is later shot dead for his crime. “BANG! I just freed his mind,” Rodney says after imagining that he has shot the officer. He continues, “No

more of this kumbaya my Lord, we shall overcome bullshit. Just BANG!” (18-19). Baraka had said the same years before: “[P]eople weren’t going for non-violence or turn the other cheek, or we shall overcome” (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*).

In his imagination, Rodney continues to address others. A taxi man: “What, you think I won’t tip? Here’s one . . . BANG! You don’t know me. When the clerk follows me through the store at Macy’s . . . What are you looking at? I’ll buy this leather coat and your minimum wage job. BANG! You don’t know me.” He concludes his monologue declaring, “When they silence, deny and reject my voice . . . BANG! BANG! BANG! / AW HELL NAW!” (19). Ultimately, to truly be free comes down to having a voice. To being listened to and viewed as having legitimate concerns and ideas. To having agency in one’s own life.

The theme of voice takes a turn inward when Freddie speaks. He shares that he believes “A lonely heart is the deepest thing I know, . . . And I guess I just think if I could find a somebody to love me his voice might be louder than the voices in my own head” (21). The voices in his own head are his alter ego telling him he should not focus on getting hooked up with a guy when “Our dad’s on top of a slave ship, my brother’s missing his big poetry competition, and all I can think about is finding a man?” (20-21). Rodney also fights to control his own mind: “Freddie, it’s like I’m exploding . . . inside . . . When I reached for my ID, my mind took me to a whole other world” (45). Rodney would not actually shoot an officer, but his own fantasy in which he imagined doing so frightened him deeply since it was such a significant departure from his conscious ethos.

Freedom of speech, freedom to form one’s own identity, freedom to think one’s own thoughts, “it’s all about freedom—liberate your mind,” says Anton, a Jamaican man in the play. When asked if he has been to the harbor to see the slave ship, Anton replies simply, “Me don’t

need go Liberty Island to see no slave ship. Me a white man. Me decided last year.” Anton argues that identity and how one sees oneself is one’s own decision. “Check this: we all got white bones. We all the same on the inside, so why can’t me be a white man on the outside?” (25). To Anton, to be white is to behave as though he is already white. When choosing to be white, a black man throws away the shackles of racism which continue to hold him down today albeit in different ways than centuries before. Anton sees himself as one who has agency, one who can choose his own destiny rather than have one assigned. Through his choice of a self-concept of whiteness rather than his actual blackness, Anton exercises power over his own life. To a certain extent, the price is the legacy of his African roots.

“The character of Anton is intentionally over-the-top, but I use it to make a strong point,” writes Beaty. “Our thoughts and feelings can keep us captive like slaves. Out of control, negative thoughts and feelings can rob us of our freedom, our joy, and our ability to create extraordinary lives” (*Transforming Pain to Power* 53).

Back at the Apollo Theatre and the poetry competition, Rodney steps onto the stage but before he can share his poem, his brother Freddie calls to tell him their father is climbing aboard the slave ship. Rodney immediately turns from the imaginary audience to the real audience (like a griot), sharing that when he told his father he was majoring in African-American History, his dad “practically disowned me—‘African-American History?! Forget the past, that’s why I worked so hard, so you could start where I left off!’” With this exchange, the opposing views of blacks are front and center: there are those who want to deal with the past, talk about it, make policies based upon it—but there are also those who want to move on, focus on the future and do what they can to help themselves as well as their own families do the same—and without looking back. Rodney points out the irony of the situation—his father on top of a premier symbol of

oppression—when he asks the rhetorical question, “And now he’s on top of a slave ship?” (*Emergency* 18). Although Reginald is desperate to forget the past, under the ocean, Citizen hears people talking, “They saying remember me” (*Gem* 69), a ship is named *Remembrance*, Solly wants someone to remember he lived (*Gem*), and Hughes and Beaty direct us, “Remember.”

The scars of slavery, however, cannot be comprehended merely by images of ships, chains, shackles and whips. Dynamic social, political, and financial forces create the need for such devices. According to Amiri Baraka, his own play, *Slaveship*, was “marred” because he did not understand the power dynamics and political forces involved in creating the climate where slavery could not only thrive but flourish in this country. While Reginald is aghast when his son announces his desire to major in African American studies, Baraka offers a counterpoint to African American playwrights:

If theatre was going to be relevant, then it had to be based on people’s struggle. *Slaveship*. It was basically a vignette. What marred it was essentially not understanding slavery . . . . I did not understand capitalism, overseers, . . . . Theatre has to serve a revolutionary kind of function. It has to transform society basically and that’s still what we say. . . . Otherwise it is just some kind of token that the leaders can wear like trinkets around their neck to say they have some culture (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*).

While Reginald’s son disagrees with his perspective, there are those whose opinions concur. Ronald, described as a high-class African American man, argues that slavery is a thing of the past: “We need to get over it. It’s been forty years since the Civil rights Movement. It’s time to

move on people” (39). In fact, he says, blacks need to quit painting all people different than themselves with the same white paintbrush. “Not all white Americans owned slaves,” continues Ronald. “Many fought to free them. Affirmative action was reparations enough . . . I’m just tired of black people asking for a handout” (39). Solly Two Kings of Wilson’s *Gem* disagrees—at least back in his era: “All it mean is you got a long row to hoe and ain’t got no plow.” Solly’s counterpoint is that, if given only half of what one needs to do a job, a person still cannot complete the work satisfactorily. If a man has an area of earth to raise vegetables but has no plow, no tool to do the work needing to be done, the earth is effectually useless. Likewise, a handout only takes people so far; it is mere sustenance. Other support systems are required to facilitate actual growth.

Like Reginald, Ronald would rather leave those “hoodlums” behind as Reginald directed his sons to do (*Emergency* 22). He would prefer that blacks stop asking for reparations or looking for a handout and that instead, they would focus on getting an education and a job and joining society versus fighting it. Caesar, a black officer of the law in *Gem*, agrees that opportunities are out there somewhere when he says, “[M]oney ain’t got nobody’s name on it. It’s floating out there go on and grab you some” (34).

But the Slave-ologist tour guide is not so easily put off; in reference to Ronald’s remark regarding reparations, she asks, “Is that how you feel? After what I just shared about the slave dungeons? You need to come back to Africa and reconnect—.” These statements enrage Ronald who interrupts countering, “Reconnect? I don’t need to go back to Africa. I can reconnect . . . to that black man begging money for food. Reconnect to that black woman prostituting herself to keep a roof over her head. Reconnect to those black kids . . . living with AIDS” (*Emergency* 39). He sees the results of the slave ship, of the slaves treated as cargo and mere property—but he

also figures that because white people have moved on, so too must blacks. People today do not own slaves, some tell themselves, so they have nothing for which to apologize. Indeed, Ronald points out that Cathy, a white woman with whom he works, is his employee—he is her superior. The roles have reversed and both accept the current circumstances. He adds, “[N]obody’s going to help us if we don’t start helping ourselves! We are here now. We have arrived” (40). We—the black people—are here now. So are the whites. The black people have “arrived,” they have equal rights, and so now must “start helping ourselves!” Ronald sees it as the black person’s responsibility to pick up the pieces and make a life for himself regardless of how damaged those pieces are.

Another interpretation can be taken from a similar statement made by the poet, Ray Ray, who shares his poem, “Knock Knock.” “. . . With the power to change this world one little boy and girl at a time./ Knock knock. Who’s there?/ We are” (30). While it is important that blacks and whites collaborate on solutions to heal our nation, it is also vital that blacks recognize and utilize their own power. “Who’s there?/ We are,” says Beaty.

To truly progress, steps must be taken with integrity, argues Beaty. While economic desperation drives some to claim a living where it is least expected, it may also be highly disrespectful. As the scene in the harbor unfolds, and Rodney and Freddie try to pass through the crowd to rescue their father who is now the center of a media circus, a street vendor begins pawning buttons: “This one here’s a slave jumpin off the boat. And this one here’s a slave beatin’ his master’s ass!” (22). One button: a slave jumping out of sheer desperation to end his life as a slave. Second button: a slave conquering his enemy using violence to end his own bondage and the violence done to him, his family, and his community. Cheap buttons which perpetuate despair, anger and violence will not lead this man to a life of integrity or meaning.

Indeed, the black man's voice is one that white America does not necessarily want to hear: "[T]hey call my anger 'The Black Man's Disease,'" declares Rodney (19). To truly listen is to face that anger—which requires facing the real history of our country, and, significantly, is currently not in the history books. It is not what is taught, tested, discussed. It is shut up in a coffin, expected to remain hidden. But until the remains of the past are identified, that history cannot remain underground without fostering disease of the American spirit. As Chief Kofi the 400-year-old captain of *Remembrance* says, "Your pain does not give you the right to deny me" (27). Discomfort does not excuse one from acknowledging reality. Shame over our country's past does not erase the damage done, nor eradicate the ongoing destruction due to policies rooted in history, or mitigate our nation's tragic prognosis if we do not remember, acknowledge, and heal.

### **Language in *Emergency***

The play begins with the ship's appearance but quickly the scene shifts to the Apollo Theatre where Rodney is supposed to present his poem on the show, "America's Next Top Poet." The sheer contrast of poetry—an elevated form of literature requiring intellect but also the necessary time to reflect, and refine—is in stark contrast to the ship's conspicuous portrayal of a horrific story about sheer survival. Sharita, the talk show host, begins her introduction with "Top poets, truth poets/ you inspire me,/ Carry me past insecurity on wings of hope" but her language quickly degenerates into "'Oh, I offended you? So What!' poets/ 'Comin' for what you stole muthafucka!' poets/ . . . Yaw goin' make me lose my mind up in here! Up in here! poets." Like the literary classification poetry has traditionally held, her language begins "on wings of hope" but quickly embraces the poets who are 'Comin' for what you stole muthafucka!' The anger of

these poets is acknowledged openly, even welcomed, and is clearly accepted as part of the forum at the Apollo. Beaty possesses the same kind of ear for voice as did August Wilson as evidenced by the talk show host's vernacular as well as that of Ronald, the business man mentioned previously. Sharita concludes her introduction with the words, "[Y]ou bettah watch out girl, here comes Shrita Jenkins! You bettah recognize!" (17).

While poetry is the form at the Apollo, the Slave-ologist doing a tour of the slave dungeon speaks to inform. Addressing the New Yorkers on a virtual tour, he begins by stating quite simply, "[W]e here at the Slave Dungeons ask that you leave your rage and pain at the entrance gate because there is enough inside. Thank you and please follow me" (38). The horrible atrocities committed are so well known, so much a part of the history this man discusses, he has forced himself to detach enough to be objective by thanking the tourists for listening and following him.

He continues, "Here, they defecated on the same floor where they slept and ate. You notice to your right a set of chairs. They lead to the Master's quarters. The African women would be led up the stairs and then raped by the Master. Thank you and please follow me" (38). In *Emergency*, Beaty has a character enact being raped before the tour guide continues. Detachment as a coping mechanism must be a common trait amongst writers who, in order to address such brutalities against their ancestors, surely could not be so productive if they allowed themselves to become steeped in the painful horrors of history.

The next stop on the tour is "the Gate of No Return." It is a small window through which the half-starved and weakened Africans were forced to pass before boarding the ship that would carry them into slavery in America. The guide concludes, "[M]y brothers and sisters, the time has come . . . we have arrived . . ." (39). The slaves had arrived at the final exit from their



previous lives' freedom, the tourists have arrived at the last stop on the tour, and they all have arrived at a point in history when the past must be addressed: the ship is in the harbor and it is going nowhere until it is dealt with adequately, completely.

Reginald, who has climbed aboard *Remembrance*, finds himself face-to-face with Kofi, the 400-year-old chief. Like Wilson's Aunt Ester who is 275 years old in *Gem of the Ocean* and even older in subsequent *Cycle* plays, Chief Kofi is a voice of wisdom from another era. The power of the spiritual realm is important for Beaty personally as well. In an interview with Rebekah Kraybill for *Sojourners*, Beaty acknowledges that it is due to the power of the spirit, of God, that he can and does his work.

Personally, as a Christian, as a believer, . . . the authentic self is synonymous with the Holy Spirit, the presence of God within. In God's enabling grace, that's the deepest part of us that is powerful: It can achieve, accomplish, heal, anything challenging that shows up in our lives . . . . [This non-sectarian concept] of the authentic self came to me. It's a place of safety inside ourselves that allows us to not get lost in the barrage of negative thoughts and feelings that often shows up in our lives, but to connect to a deeper part of ourselves, so that we can still be empowered. (43)

Beaty chooses to offer his strength to serve others and does so through a variety of modalities.

Like Bynum in *Joe Turner*, Beaty focuses on healing, binding people together through compassion. His poem, "Knock Knock," while part of *Emergency*, is also a stand-alone piece which runs on *YouTube* and is the basis for a children's book by the same title. Kraybill writes, "Knock knock down the doors that I could not" is one especially poignant line the father in the book writes to his son; it carries a call to healing and liberation that is found in all of Beaty's

work” (41).

Beatty blurs the lines of the living and the dead when the captain of *Remembrance*, King Kofi, speaks to Reginald, the father. This is the same technique employed by Wilson with Aunt Ester, and by Wolfe in *Colored Museum*. Reginald, however does not readily accept that which he cannot verify. “I am a man of reason. How do you expect me to believe?” he asks.

Exasperated, he questions his own vision, his own thoughts: “This is not real. It’s all in my head—.” But when Kofi forces Reginald to look into the hold of the ship, the non-believer can no longer hold his position. “Oh no, the bones . . . they’re in chains . . . and the ship, It’s full of them. (*He screams to the spectators below.*) It’s full of bones! It’s full of bones!” (27).

The repetition of the bone motif is a hallmark of some prominent plays by African American writers. For instance, bones are addressed in a variety of ways by Beatty and Wilson. In *Emergency*, the bones in the ship are cause for Reginald to listen to Chief Kofi. In another scene, Anton, a Jamaican man, insists that because bones are white, and a man should be able to choose his own color since “[w]e all the same on the inside” (25). Wilson’s “gems of the ocean” are the bones of slaves who died crossing the Atlantic. In that play, bones were used to create an entire civilization on the sea floor, a place where those who visit find beauty, transformation, and grace. Those who want to visit these gems of the ocean must visit Aunt Ester, and sail away on her paper boat—her own Bill of Sale (81-82). A piece of paper and one’s imagination can lead to transcendence—or simple deliverance—and whether that leads to freedom or into slavery all depends on to whom the paper belongs.

Back on the deck of *Remembrance*, Reginald and Chief Kofi use Shakespeare’s language to debate the value of remembering. According to Chief Kofi, one must actively remember in order to recognize freedom. To live as a slave, with no memory of being free, no dream of being

free, will never lead to freedom. One must remember what it was like before slavery. Wise Kofi and Reasonable Reginald debate:

CHIEF KOFI: *Remembrance, the fullness of who you are . . . your past—*

REGINALD: Why do you even care?

CHIEF KOFI: *To be or not to be that is the question—*

REGINALD: To be or not to be . . . what?

CHIEF KOFI: *Free, of course, you forgot.*

REGINALD: A ghetto hoodlum murdered my wife, left my sons motherless, why should I remember that?

CHIEF KOFI: *'Tis nobler in the mind to suffer—*

REGINALD: Suffer what?

CHIEF KOFI: *The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, that's how you forgot.*

REGINALD: Outrageous fortune, that's how I forgot.

CHIEF KOFI: *But the time has come to put to rest the chains that bind you. Sleep no more. (34-35)*

Reginald does not want to remember his wife's murder, and has taken the position that it is nobler to suffer than to take action. He blames "outrageous fortune" and has slipped away into another reality, as his younger son Freddie says: "It was like this world became too much for him so his mind took him to a place his heart could handle" (22).

But Kofi will not accept this disappearing act. He insists that Reginald pay attention to the present. Ultimately, he succeeds. When Freddie and Rodney argue with an officer to board the ship to save their father, Reginald is brought back to the present. His reverie is over. "My

sons . . . they're frightened, I can feel them . . . I have to save my sons—" but Kofi challenges him:

CHIEF KOFI: *How can you save your sons, when you will not save yourself? I do this for you—*

REGINALD: My children are suffering!

CHIEF KOFI: *Many of our children are suffering. Lost without the Truth. That is why I sent Remembrance!* (40)

Kofi insists that Reginald remember, that he reconcile the past and the present, that he does more than talk, read, or write—that he take action.

### **The Role of Poetry in *Emergency***

When connected with vocalized intention, language can, however, become the catalyst for action as seen in the Apollo Theatre poetry competition. While the talk show host stalls for time and for Rodney's return from the slave ship to the station, three other poets take the stage.

First Ray Ray Christopher, "a sixteen-year-old with a hip hop vibe" steps forward. His poem is the desperate story of a little boy who longs for his father's return, for the return to their game of "Knock Knock." He wishes to hear his father tell him that he loves him, to feel his father's arms around him, "cause I miss you . . . cause there's things I don't know/ And I thought maybe you could teach me/ . . . I want to be just like you but I've forgotten who you are" (29). Ray Ray speaks to Daniel Beaty's life as a child growing up with a father who was more often incarcerated than not. In *Transforming Pain to Power*, Beaty shares the moment when, as a sophomore in college, he visited his father in prison:

In this moment, I am once again the little boy that longed for his daddy. In this moment, all the love I felt for him as a small child comes flooding back to me. As I sit and listen to his stories—some certainly lies and excuses—I devour every word, desperate for them to be true, desperate to understand, to believe that his choices, his abandonment were not my fault. (58)

In a series of letters with his father, Beaty developed the concept of “mental inheritance,” a term meaning “the primary thought patterns you inherited/learned from your primary caregiver(s) and core community as a child, through both conscious and unconscious suggestion” (59). This kind of self-study has led to great self-awareness for Beaty, and with that, he has chosen to become aware of others and determine ways to empower people across the world.

The second poet, Eric, introduces his work as “Duality Duel, an Autobiography of Personal Insanity.” The duality Eric speaks of is that of the Nerd and the Negro. The Nerd has been to the Ivy League and the Negro argues that Nerd has to acknowledge his roots, that “Yo’ daddy still smoke heroin,/ Yo’ brother still on crack/ And yo’ Mama is still black” (36-37). Negro tells Nerd that “these little kids on the street, they need you” and he should return home.

In fact, Beaty did go to the Ivy League (he earned honors at Yale University in English as well as music), and upon graduation, applied for numerous acting and wait staff jobs but to no avail. Eventually he took a job as a guest artist teaching children throughout New York City.

But when I entered these classrooms in some of the most economically challenged areas . . . and saw the eyes of so many young people desperate for hope, I saw myself looking back at me . . . . I realized it was time for me to integrate all of the parts of myself so that

I could be of service. I realized that though I was still very much in process, I had survived. I had overcome. Now my responsibility and privilege was to be about the survival and overcoming of others. (*Transforming* 176)

Nerd counters that “[A]ll you seem to feel is rage,/ And that will keep me out of their circles/ And off the front page” but Negro answers, “Not if you shoot a muthafucka!” (*Emergency* 36). Beatty again addresses violence being used to solve a problem at the same time acknowledging the disparity within the black community. There are those who fight injustice through violence and there are those whom the first group calls “wannabee whites.”

Yet, despite Negro’s anger, he points out that he “gave you time enough to heal” (36). The theme of healing through time and memory is brought out in this poem as well. But Negro tells Nerd, “this assimilatin’ bullshit will surely beat you down,/ . . . Put the strut back in yo’ walk, say what your really feel/ Be all of you so all of us can heal” (37). Integrating all parts of one’s self, all facets of one’s life is imperative before a person, indeed, society at large can truly become united.

The third poet, Wekeem, is a teacher who describes the horrors of inner-city schools where the students must practice safety drills to prepare for the possibility of drive-by shootings. He expresses anger at the black superstars who are more focused on bling than helping the black community.

Black Superstar, tell me, where do you stand?  
Are you standing at all as our children fall  
Into the depths of despair. Are you there?  
Bling bling?? Oh, now I got their attention.

I hold you in poetic detention until you learn this lesson:

Our children will watch BET and buy your CD

Before they will ever think of reading a book

...

You are profiting off our children's neglect

Put some thought in your lyrics and show some respect

Words are powerful, you have endless effect

So get over yourself and choose to connect

To something greater than your own ego. (42)

Wakeem gives poetic voice to the sentiments shared by Beaty in *Transforming*. There he writes,

If you want to control the psyche of a people control the way they perceive themselves.

Create little black boxes and large screens

Where we parade about as though ignorant of our dignity.

Where our women are displayed as whores and our men as angry beasts.

Put in lots of loud music with steady hard beats

And throw in some bling bling for bad taste.

I am not angry.

I am enraged. (210)

Beaty disparages those who profit off the masses who, seeing themselves in degrading stereotypes, have nothing better to aspire toward. Writing for *Odyssey* in support of Beaty's position, Matthew Jones writes:

Although white and Black performers use the Black culture to entertain millions of

people, it has tarnished the Black community in the process. Through this process many Blacks themselves perceive their own race via what they see through entertainment. In return, it has created generations of people who aspire to negative stereotypes that involve gangs, violence, sex, and drugs. The Blackface Minstrelsy has exploited the Black culture and continues to do so to this day.

Beatty continues,

Enraged enough to remember, to honor, to create:

To refuse to write black tragedy—too many of our lives have been tragic enough

But to tell a story of possibility and hope—

We must tell a story that empowers our village from coast to coast and across waters . . . .

The charge is ours:

To be more brilliant than we ever dreamed we could

To value our lives when others do not

. . .

It is time to tell a new story, the true story—

We must tell the story for ourselves and for our children. (210-11)

August Wilson once said we must “tell the story.” Beatty now adds, “The charge is ours.” Beatty the artist-activist infuses his words with the passion he feels and urgency he believes warrants immediate action—hence the play title, *Emergency*. Though spoken in a gentler manner, the words Wilson’s Bynum speaks to Herald convey the same message: “All you got to do is stand up and sing it” (*Joe Turner* 84).

The fourth and final poet is Rodney, who ultimately does make it back to the Apollo



Theatre to deliver his poem. He addresses both to the audience and his father:

How do I construct the pieces of my manhood

When my model has been crumbling before my eyes?

I'm missing peace in this puzzle and I'm losing hope in this game

. . .

And father when I heard you scream, "It's full of bones!"

Then I heard you say to me "Go, tell the story."

Hope, hope, hope . . . like a ray of light exploded in the depths of me

And BANG! It's waking me up

And as I awake and see . . .

We are all afraid, all confused, all connected . . . all Free

As Free as we choose to be.

. . .

We can overcome if we change the way we see

See ourselves, see our past, see our possibility

Our bones, our bones, our bones they breathe:

We are the essence of liberty!

We are the breath of divinity!

We are all family!

We must not die!

We must not sleep!

We must wake up!

Wake up and DREAM!

*(Blackout) (50-51)*

Just as Aunt Ester charges Mr. Citizen with his “duty to life” and demands that he “live, Mr. Citizen! Live!” and Ntozake Shange reminds us to remember the rainbow, Rodney challenges every one of us to stop sleeping, to wake up, and to dream the dreams we can and should aspire to hope for, to imagine our potential as individuals and as a nation. The sheer power of the repetition to this climactic point—especially when presented live onstage—is enough to encourage one to believe that healing and peace are possible.

Daniel Beaty literally weaves his work together—poems, books on empowerment, musicals, plays, his program *I Dream*—culminating in an incredibly broad platform on which he takes his stand and aims to help heal our nation.

### **Daniel Beaty Heals**

Like the little boy in *Emergency* who sings in a choir, Beaty’s public speaking career began quite by chance early on in his life:

My second grade teacher Sarah Adams asked for someone to recite James Weldon Johnson's “The Creation” for the school assembly. I volunteered and when I performed in front of the students, faculty, and parents, I felt an immense joy. I knew I wanted to have this experience as much as possible even at that young age. (Beaty, personal interview)

His writing career began in third grade when, in response to listening to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have A Dream” speech, Beaty wrote a short paper that captured the attention of his

teacher, Mavis Jackson. In an interview with Frank Rizzo, Beaty shared that his essay, “I Think the Best and I Expect the Best,” earned him the opportunity to speak to various groups across the country including Rotary Clubs, NAACP meetings, the Ohio Democratic Convention, to superintendents of schools—one of whom facilitated Beaty’s attainment of a scholarship allowing him to attend a private high school which ultimately led to his receipt of a scholarship to Yale University.

Some educators have addressed the issue of an essentially one-sided historical record being presented in this country. “The consequences of such a calculated omission has in turn resulted in Diaspora and generations of people of African descent ill-informed of their history. This has produced for them a grossly distorted view of their potential as individuals and as a race,” write the authors of the Digital Scholarship Lab. Beaty offers this remedy: “I believe it is the role of the Artist to invest in the learning and development of future artists which is what I teach at Columbia University. I also believe in nurturing creativity at a very young age which is why I write children's books.” He is particularly interested in doing work that can be broadcasted on television and is therefore more accessible to everyone. “I want my work to reach as many people as possible” (Beaty, personal interview). As he does his work, young children, particularly boys of color, will see themselves in the man who is writing the script, onstage front and center, and even the one directing the show. Furthermore, they certainly cannot wish to meet a person in whom integrity is better exemplified.

Indeed, without such role models, children do not know who to look to, relying on the entertainment industry to fill the void. Of course, the primary role models for any child should be his/her parents. Beaty tackles the issue of fatherlessness in the black community in *Emergency* when Freddie lays it squarely on the table. He says, “Most black men grow up without their

fathers. Rodney and I, we were so proud to have ours” (*Emergency* 21). Sixteen-year-old poet Ray Ray longs for his father’s guidance for the simplest things. He wants to know “How to shave, how to dribble a ball,/ How to talk to a lady, walk like a man” but his father only answers in his imagination:

“Dear Son, I’m sorry I never came home./ For every lesson I failed to teach, hear these words:/ Shave in one direction with strong deliberate strokes to avoid irritation./ Dribble the page with the brilliance of your ballpoint pen./ Walk like a god and your goddess will come to you. No longer will I be there to knock on your door so you must learn to knock for yourself.”

Ray Ray continues: “[Y]ears later a little boy cries and so I speak these words and try to heal,/ Try to father myself and I dream up/ A father who says the words my father did not—.” (29) Indeed, it is through dreaming the words he never heard that Ray Ray can heal himself, learn to become independent, and hold the idea that he must be his own advocate in this world. While connected by blood, parents’ and children’s lives can and sometimes must take different paths. The boy in Ray Ray’s poem can raise himself to be the man he wants to become because “we are our father’s sons and daughters, but we are not their choices.” Ultimately, it is through making one’s own choices that a person will have “the power to change this world one little boy and girl at a time./ Knock knock./ Who’s there?/ We are” (30). We are, says Beaty. We have arrived. As a people, as one nation, we have arrived. It is time to take action and function as one nation.

“I am a storyteller,” says Daniel Beaty, “and my purpose in the world is to inspire people to transform pain to power.” Beaty wastes no time, making the most of every day to achieve his mission: prior to an interview for *Sojourners*, he performed his one-person play written about

Paul Robeson in the evening, while during the day filming a documentary with the Ford Foundation about work he is doing for youth whose parents are incarcerated (Beaty, Kraybill 40). Far from being an artist with a singular focus, Beaty seems to be constantly engaged in a variety of projects across the country, and, with a mission to serve as a catalyst for change, the focus is not on himself but on the recipients, participants, and audience members. He is the agent actively promoting and supporting others' transformations—some of whom are the young people who will one day become leaders of movements in their own lives.

### **A Voice that Emboldens**

In an interview with Linda Armstrong, Beaty discussed another of his plays, *Through the Night*. Its value, he said, lies in its power to show children they have the power to make their lives better. "It is about what's next for us—how can we really move through the darkness that shows up in our lives? The reason why is that our children are watching. When we live less than our potential, less than our dreams, it has an impact. Seeing the show will give the audience something that will make their lives better" (19). The role of healer is explored further in another interview with Kraybill:

One of the biggest messages I try to communicate in [*Transforming Pain to Power*] is that we first must get present to our pain and ultimately transform it by asking ourselves: What can I do? What can I contribute to others, contribute to the world? In the process of being a storyteller, and certainly in my live performances, I have the hope of transforming my audience in some way, but I'm also transformed in the act of the sharing. We're all wounded healers. As we share our stories, we help others heal. I think

God heals us. (44)

To Beaty, his own healing occurred through God and now he carries the torch forward to help others.

One manifestation of Beaty's efforts to assist in the transition of pain to empowerment is *I Dream*, a program for youth which currently operates in three cities: Watts, CA; Omaha, NE; and Boston, MA—cities aptly chosen for as Ron Milner, writer and part of the Black Theater Movement, said, “Minorities make up the inner city so that’s where we should do our plays” (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*). Milner is right of course—and it is also where programs are needed to develop leaders in social justice. Beaty describes this program as

a nationally recognized social justice initiative that uses the tools of the arts, immersive group exercises, and trauma recovery to support young people to rewrite the story of race and class inequity in America, and create social justice projects to make that new story reality. *I Dream* has reached over 2000 young people in three cities across the nation (Beaty, DanielBeaty.com).

In this program, Beaty seeks to inspire young people through a combination of the legacy of African American leaders of the past with those in the present to inspire young people to become leaders in the future. In this important respect, Beaty goes far beyond many of his colleagues' writing today by making a clear and concerted effort to reach out to children in addition to engaging in his own artistic pursuits. While some such as Ntozake Shange and other playwrights have written many children's books, Beaty has developed complete programs which provide a model of success and which also function independently of his presence. Seizing opportunities—as well as creating them—is the way forward; establishing a methodology in which these are

self-perpetuating is imperative for true impact and long-lasting change.

Who better to inspire the nation than children? Beaty focuses on youth as a way to heal our nation as well as develop leaders in his *I Dream* program. There are five fundamental elements: transformation, the arts, trauma recovery, community building, and technology. He explains,

When we transform individuals, we create a greater possibility for long-lasting and deep social transformation. The arts, artists, and tools of the arts have a central role to play in social justice movements. The creative and narrative gifts that artists bring have the possibility to advance conversations and action toward race and class equity in new, creative ways. Trauma recovery is essential to healing the race and class inequity in America; building resilience; and creating meaningful, long-lasting change. Community building for collective education, reimagining, and action is a core strategy for creating deep democracy and opportunity for all. Technology is a powerful platform to give voice, educate, engage, mobilize the largest possible community of participants (Beaty, DanielBeaty.com).

With a vision of African American children claiming their heritage and striving to meet their potential, Beaty stands on the shoulders of his ancestors: William Wells Brown opened a theater, Langston Hughes wrote poems and plays to great acclaim, Lorraine Hansberry shone a spotlight on fair housing practices and the need for quality education, Amiri Baraka founded the Black Arts Movement, Ntozake Shange told stories from a colored woman's perspective, George C. Wolfe used satire to force us to remember and imagine, and August Wilson defined a century of social issues concerning African Americans while placing his characters in the forefront of

many Americans' consciousness. Beaty remains a theatre artist as these playwrights are, addressing similarly important subjects, and simultaneously reaches for the hands of children, lifting them up to their places on the stage.



# CHAPTER 3

## CONTEMPORARY VOICES: CALLS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH THEATRE

While Daniel Beaty speaks on the international stage, local artist-activists also make important contributions in their own communities. These too must be honored as it is often at the grass roots level that actual change occurs.

### Von Washington, Sr.:

#### **Sit Down, and Be Quiet! Now, *Let the Brotha Talk***

Von Washington, Sr. and his wife, Fran, founders of Washington Productions, Inc., perform in many southwestern Michigan schools providing an important opportunity for students to see African Americans as educators, theatre artists, authors, and as community leaders. Through their repertoire of dozens of original works presented through the forum of reader's theatre, students have come to know the characters Kiki and Sanko, and simultaneously have become more familiar with African American culture. While much of the couple's effort is devoted to teaching children in this forum, Washington, Sr., a retired professor of Western Michigan University's Department of Theatre, has also written numerous plays which have been produced around the world.

During an interview with this writer, Washington noted that "Mama always gave me books," which inspired his love of reading and, eventually, seeing education as his "salvation." He also learned that paying close attention to politics is important: "Change is happening every minute. If you're not conscious of this, you're not on top of it." In his play, *Let the Brotha Talk*, Washington speaks clearly to contemporary concerns but does so with a touch of levity—

demonstrating his skill at maintaining a delicate balance between addressing serious issues and his flair for the comedic.

*Let the Brotha Talk* is an interview being conducted by a black woman addressing a black man on the radio. The radio personality Jeannie Jean hosts “the radio program that—*tells it like it is whether you want to hear it or not*” (3). This particular show will focus on and interview with a Mr. Blackman (who does not want his identity revealed—in contrast to Beatty’s Rodney who, despite his hopes, sees himself as a nameless, faceless black man in the eyes of an officer, cab driver and store clerk). The premise of the show is based on “Your letters and calls [which] have indicated that many of you are having difficulty figuring out what is going on with African American men” (3). Washington minces no words in calling out the issues faced by the black community. The host continues, “(Reading) ‘Reports indicate that black males are killing each other at an alarming rate. In addition, they are imprisoned, drop out of school, fail to marry the mothers of their children, experience high unemployment and are abusive to their mates. All of these at a higher rate than other groups’” (3).

Not long into the program, it becomes clear that the interview will go both ways: Mr. Blackman will not be the only one asked to answer questions. The public’s inquiries quickly become personal to both parties, tensions emerge, and they are forced to take a commercial break.

JEANNIE: Well now wait a minute Mr. Blackman, I’m asking the questions here and—

BLACKMAN: Yeah, I know, but if I’m going to make it clear to you, I need to know what you know. I mean you say it every day, “to understand, you have to ask questions.” Right? Because you see, I am a book, a living book, and in order to help you read me, I

need to know something about you as the reader.

...

You see, as a black woman, you are a part of what's going on with me and I can't explain me without mentioning you. And, a lot of people are coming to you to find out what's going on with me.

...

Because one thing we've got to get clear. A lot of the things that happen to me, got something to do with you. (6-7)

Just as in the poem in *Emergency* in which the Negro and Nerd learn they need one another, Washington's Mr. Blackman says, so is the case for men and women. Blackman's comments are directed at Jeannie as a black woman—but could just as well be directed at whites. As Verna Dee said, "All this separation has to stop. We need to unify, support each other, respect each other's work . . . get together more, discuss more, trust more, share more" (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*).

Jeannie insists that he tell his story, demanding, "What is going on!?" (11).

BLACKMAN: Everything! We are at war and we don't know who or what to strike at. Have you ever asked yourself, why these brothers are killing each other? Naw, all you do is give statistics—

JEANNIE: Now wait a minute Mr. Blackman, don't throw everybody into that "all you do bag!" Everyone is not just keeping statistics. Some people are concerned. (11)

They continue to debate who became concerned when and why, and when Jeannie briefly steps out of the studio, Blackman addresses the audience, as a griot.

BLACKMAN: Damn. Seems like I'm dealing with this every day. The other day a white guy asked me about the brothers who attacked Reginald Denny in that Los Angeles riot . . . . Before I could get a word out of my mouth, he blurted out, "[D]on't you think in this case the criminals won?" I told him that I could not separate Rodney King from Reginald Denny . . . . Oh, I could see as my response was coming out of my mouth that he was displeased. Then I asked him if he had ever heard of "*the red summer*?" he said "no, what's that?" I told him that during the summer of 1919, 78 black men were lynched all across America and 10 of them were war heroes, some still in uniform. He said, "*I didn't know that. Is that the truth?*" I said yeah, strange things happen in the heat of battle, huh? (12-13)

It may be worth noting that two of Beatty's primary characters are also named Rodney and Reginald, further connecting history with theatre. Rodney King and Reginald Denny fought the battle which requires no war uniforms, though it was the same battle as that of "the Red Summer," the battle of race. As an educator himself, Washington teaches audience members who may also be unfamiliar with the Red Summer—acknowledging that American schools do little to paint a complete picture of the history of this country leaving out chapters and entire stories of peoples—mostly of women and people of color. Washington's acknowledgement of this fact, while presented without attempting to elicit guilt makes the point that as a nation, we have much work to do to honor all people throughout our shared history.

On the subject of male-female relations, Jeannie asks, on behalf of a listener, why it is black men "mess around with other women" (15) and demands that Blackman "explain why it happens so much. A lot of women think you're all just a bunch of liars" (17). He responds:

BLACKMAN: Who has to lie? Sisters aren't turning brothers away because they've got another lady. . . . And another thing, this "*because I gave you some you are supposed to be mine*" jive has got to go. The Laquita's of the world need to get their signals clear before they give up the action.

JEANNIE: But let's face it Mr. Blackman, the Laquita's of the world think that if you don't give up the action you don't get the man. Is there no hope that black men will stick with one woman?

BLACKMAN: Yeah, when Black women make it clear that they care if they do or not. 'Cause right now they don't care . . . The new tradition is, if he doesn't have a job—dump him. Hell, the sister is not after a relationship unless the brotha has it made. (17)

The issue of monogamous relationships addressed in this play is an effort by Washington to open a dialogue. When Blackman says women "don't care," he places the responsibility of good communication on the women as well as the men, a parallel to the need for good communication as the responsibility of all parties having a dialogue, including those whose subject is race.

Lastly, Washington addresses the need for young men to have real and healthy role models in their lives. He refers to the pivotal point as the time when "a young black boy . . . reaches his 'jumping off period,' and he starts asking questions to get information that will guide him so he can make his mark in this world" (21). As Beatty addresses this subject through the *I Dream* project, so too has Washington acknowledged the vacuum that exists in the lives of far too many of the youth today, particularly the black youth. Washington attempts to explain the complexity of the situation this way:

JEANNIE: Every body out there knows that black fathers are not at home.

BLACKMAN: Some black fathers are at home.

JEANNIE: Right. But we have a high percentage that are not. And our listeners are asking why they would rather kill each other in the streets than lead a decent life.

BLACKMAN: Yeah, but are they asking themselves why, if they are so much trouble, black women keep bringing black boys into the world? I mean they can look around and see what's going on just like everybody else. Maybe they don't care whether there's a dad there're or not . . . . How come their Mama's, who keep saying they don't need no man, start looking for one when they're having trouble with their sons? . . . .

JEANNIE: Because they need the father to set an example, that's why.

BLACKMAN: The example is set. Like you said, the prisons are full of them and they're killing each other in the streets. But that doesn't stop the women. They know there is no man there and they still keep having babies.

JEANNIE: . . . [A]re you saying that women are the reason that black men are killing themselves and shouldn't give birth to baby boys because they might end up in jail?

BLACKMAN: No! . . . I'm saying, you can't have a baby without a woman and women better look before they leap. (23-24)

Gender politics and the responsibility to plan for one's family are significant issues in society today, and by taking plays like this into high schools, perhaps students will reflect on their own futures before they "give up the action." Ultimately, Mr. Blackman's identity is revealed, and he must answer a call about being a responsible father himself. The caller is his own daughter, Kaneeka, whom he has not seen in years. She writes, "I haven't seen you in a while and I wanted to let you know that . . . I'm gonna have a baby. I already know it's a boy. I know that I made a

mistake, but I want to keep him . . .” (27). In discussing this with Jeannie on the air, Jeannie attempts to offer her advice to which he responds:

BLACKMAN: . . . She’s having a baby just like her mother did.

JEANNIE: No, she’s having a baby just like you and her mother did (31).

Jeannie puts the responsibility squarely on both parents then takes the lead and tells Kaneeka,

JEANNIE: . . . If things aren’t what you want them to be between you and that boy’s father, don’t talk against him. Try to let that child know that you both created this situation. (*Proud of herself.*)

BLACKMAN: That’s right . . . . [D]ecide to keep his father in his life too. If you don’t you may hurt that baby in ways you don’t understand, no matter how much you love him. Don’t let one mistake lead to another.

. . .

You find that boy and you hold him until I get there. And I promise you, some how, we gonna figure out, the right thing to do. (32-33)

The theme of fatherlessness and the pain manifested due to separation from one’s father recurs throughout these writings and provides space for choice, for new beginnings. The poem in *Emergency* and later the children’s book by the same title, “Knock Knock,” also addresses the profound impact of a father’s absence. In Beaty’s play, Ray Ray Christopher boldly embraces the decision to remember that

Yes, we are our father’s sons and daughters, but we are not their choices

For despite their absences we are still here. Still alive. . .

Still breathing . . . With the power to change this world one little boy and girl at a time.

Knock knock.

Who's there?

We are. (*Emergency* 30)

While Ray Ray echoes King's famous speech here, the children's book offers a slightly different rendition:

KNOCK KNOCK with the knowledge that you are my son and you have a bright beautiful future.

For despite my absence you are still here.

KNOCK KNOCK.

Who's there?

"You are." (*Knock Knock* 33-36)

By telling children that *they* are the ones standing at the door to the future, children will sense the inherent opportunity and do so, perhaps, with anticipation. What will *they* do? What will *they* say? What will *they* create? Beaty offers an invitation to think about these questions for themselves, and in so doing, suggests empowerment. Beaty and Washington have that too in common: each makes sincere and concerted efforts to have direct contact with the youth in society—some of whom may one day become leaders in their own communities.

**Tarrell Alvin McCraney: Don't Short *The Brothers Size***

Daniel Beaty's father's repeated incarceration and his older brother's drug addiction



greatly informed his own drive to live otherwise. He threw himself into academia and focused on “thinking the best, expecting the best.” Drugs and imprisonment are both subjects of Tarrell Alvin McCraney’s play, *The Brothers Size*, a story about two brothers—one who tries to save the other from himself—but ultimately, whose love for one another forces them to part ways.

In the same year that Beaty’s *Emergency* opened at The Public Theater in New York City (2006), McCraney produced *The Brothers Size* at the Yale School of Drama. The play tells the story of two brothers Ogun and Oshoosi whose different paths in life threaten to split them apart. Ultimately, however, forgiveness prevails and though separated by distance, they remain together in spirit. Elder brother Ogun owns an auto repair shop and younger brother Oshoosi has just been released from prison for a crime he did not commit: drug possession. The drugs were a friend’s, Elegba’s, who has given up on actually having dreams and instead allows life’s circumstances to take him where they will, even if that means going back to prison.

Beaty’s work on the effects of incarceration is another aspect of his work that offers a point of connection with that of McCraney’s, extended by Beaty beyond the single person once imprisoned by asking us to consider the hypothetical family left behind:

People might think that since a person committed a crime, he or she deserves to be punished. But when you look at children, then you start to have a conversation . . . the next generation is hurting because of something that they’re not responsible for. We begin to ask ourselves, what kind of nation are we creating with some of these fatherless/motherless children? (Kraybill 44)

Familial relationships suspended or even severed due to incarceration result in a sense of loss for all concerned; in prison, relationships are sometimes forged to alleviate the impact of this

vacuum. In his play, McCraney addresses the issue of homosexual behavior in the prison system, and though not the central theme, it is important to note the subject given that it affects the self-concept of so many young men who experience life in prison. According to the character Elegba, if a young man does not identify himself with another man in the jail, he will be brutalized by older, stronger, more experienced men. Elegba's overtures toward Oshoosi while sitting in the car just before getting arrested unsettle Oshoosi. Later, in a scene when Oshoosi is laying asleep on Ogun's couch, he dreams of an encounter with Elegba:

ELEGBA: Prison make grown men scared of the dark again. Put back the boogey monsters and the voodoo man we spend our whole life trying to forget . . .

. . .

ELEGBA: You sing with me? (*Singing*) Mmm . . .

OSHOOSI: (*Singing*) Mmm . . .

ELEGBA: Yeah we sing so we know we together . . .

You and me make it so our harmony make a light . . . In the dark. I know you in that dark place . . . (175-76)

Elegba also behaves like a brother to Oshoosi while they are in prison, filling an emotional void that at times becomes too great for Oshoosi to bear, who cries out for his brother Ogun in his sleep. Speaking to Ogun, Elegba shares what he saw one night as Oshoosi lay in his cell:

But he was strong.

Quiet to hisself.

To hisself always, but everybody break somewhere.

And one night, one night, he . . . call for you . . .

One night he just say, “I want my brother

Somebody call my brother . . .”

This grown man this man,

Crying for his brother . . .

Sobbing into the night,

“Og come for Shoosi now . . .”

. . .

Can’t mock no man in that much earthly pain.

He make us all miss our brothers,

The ones we ain’t neva even have

All the jailhouse quiet,

The guards stop like a funeral coming down the halls

In respect, respect of this man mourning the loss of his brother.

Elegba’s description of the psychological and emotional horrors of imprisonment offer a glimpse behind the statistics in the media. While he manages to assuage Oshoosi’s physical needs, he concludes, “I can’t never be his brother like you his brother./ Never./ You know that right” (210-11).

Though metal bars and brick walls define their physical world, prisoners can still escape in to their dreams, into books. Oshoosi discovers a text about Madagascar in the prison library and later relays his impressions to Ogun:

This man . . .

This nigga . . .

This man . . .

He look just like me!

I swear somebody trying to fuck with me . . .

Legba or the warden done got a picture of me and stuck it in this book about Madagascar with me half naked n shit . .

But it ain't!

Him and me could've been twins man!

He standing and you know what he saying . . .

What it look like he saying?

“Come on let's go.”

I can see it in his eyes!

I need to be out there looking for the me's.

He got something to tell me man.

Something about me that I don't know 'cause I am living here and all I see here are faces telling me what's wrong with me. (202-203)

The intrinsic need of human beings to know their lineage, to know their ancestors' culture, to know their own people draws Oshoosi away from the world he has known. He needs to leave and go “looking for the me's.” Beaty's ship *Remembrance* speaks to the same point: without knowing the African kings of the past, the slaves of the past, the oppressors and heroes of the past, one lives life with less direction, and possibly less purpose. Among others, Von Washington, Sr. and Daniel Beaty serve as role models for young African American youth, particularly the boys, who desperately need to be “looking for the me's” in the right places.

Just as Beaty uses poetry interspersed with standard play format, one of the interesting

stylistic elements of this play is McCraney's use of the actors stating their own stage directions. For instance, in scene six, Oshoosi says, "Oshoosi Size wakes from a nightmare/ Realizing, ah hell, he late for work" (177). Scene seven continues with Oshoosi Size speaking: "Oshoosi at the shop!/ Standing breathing hard/ From the walk" (178). This technique harkens back to the style employed by some griots who narrate as storyteller, direct the audience, and sometimes perform the story and characters' roles as well. Bertolt Brecht also employed this method in an effort to force people to remember they were in a theatre watching a play, and what they were viewing was not real life on stage. His goal was to require the audience members to study characters' words and actions as objectively as possible ("Epic Theatre and Brecht"). This technique is uncommon in current day texts, so McCraney's incorporation of this technique is likely to be unfamiliar to many but thereby offers a freshness as well as an objectivity from the action onstage serving to distance the audience from the intensity of the story yet focusing their interest on the characters' concerns.

Ultimately, Oshoosi runs from police before he can be returned to jail, taking refuge in Ogun's house. Realizing what has happened, Ogun directs his younger brother to take his truck, along with his cash. "This everything . . . / All I got it's yours./ Here Oshoosi." Despite Oshoosi's protests, Ogun insists: "It's done . . . / Get in the truck . . . / Take it . . . Go south . . . / See Mexico" (258).

Oshoosi's fear evoked by police is sadly traceable to actual events not just between police officers and men of color, but in the realm of theatre as well. With the production of Ronald Milner's *Who's Got His Own* (1966), a critic disputed a line in the play that a black man could actually be arrested and beaten for no apparent reason. On his way to the theatre opening night, this actually happened to Glynn Turman as he made his way to American Plays Theatre when he

was in fact arrested, beaten and jailed. Turman later said, there's "no humor in this play, so whites were uncomfortable; blacks laughed out of recognition of what they knew to be true—so there was tension between blacks and whites" in the theatre (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*).

McCraney addresses current issues in society—drug abuse, incarceration, suspected until proven innocent—as well as the classic themes of family loyalty, identity, and the multiple meanings of freedom in this play. Knowing that poverty exists, profiling occurs, and love conquers all, perhaps audience members will be more inclined to consider their own roles in what is currently a society in which much is out of balance.

### **Katori Hall Calls out from *The Mountaintop***

A figure of inspiration for Daniel Beaty is the legendary Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose speech Beaty listened to in Mavis Jackson's third grade classroom. While King's voice, passion, and hope captivated Beaty, playwright Katori Hall wondered what this esteemed man was thinking and feeling on his last night on Earth. Her answer took the form of a play entitled, *The Mountaintop* (2012). In this piece, history meets theatre conjuring up a great leader and all for which he fought, in which he believed, and for that which he died trying to achieve.

Everyone is familiar with the name Martin Luther King, Jr., including young children. He is a hero to many, a skillful orator and charismatic leader to many more, and to some, he was a man just like every other man. Hall holds King accountable for the man he was: a great leader, an inspiration to blacks and whites, but a man nonetheless, one who possessed strengths as well as frailties.

Hall imagines King's last night on earth before his assassination and, therefore, sets her

play in Memphis, Tennessee, in the Lorraine Motel, Room 306, April 3, 1968. The play opens with King trying to relax after a long day and while continuing to make work-related calls, he orders room service and makes conversation with Camae who brings his requested newspaper and coffee. Eventually it becomes clear she is no ordinary waitress with whom to flirt: she is an angel who has arrived to listen to King's concerns on his final night. In a reference to Malcolm X,

CAMAE: He in heaven.

KING: Is that right?

CAMAE: You'll see him there . . . One day.

KING: Camae, you talk a lot of nonsense sometimes.

CAMAE: Nonsense comin' out of a pretty woman's mouth ain't nonsense at all. It's poetry. (21)

Hall evokes the spiritual, historical, and literary realms all in a few lines here, following the pattern of her predecessors the griots, as well as Wolfe, Wilson, and Beaty.

When King's heart starts "thundering," Camae becomes alarmed, and, trying to get his attention calls him Michael, his "Christian name." King responds with suspicion:

KING: . . . Oh. So you one of them, huh?

. . .

KING: An incognegro. A spy.

He fears she'll send tapes to his wife, and after all, she hinted earlier she knew him to have committed an act of infidelity.

CAMAE: . . . I know God liked Malcolm X. And you woulda liked him, too. He didn't drank. Smoke. Cuss. Or . . . Cheat. On. His Wife. (*Beat.*) (20)

For all his gifts, King was a man—and as such, gave in to his temptations. He also must have had some fears, although he presented himself as a calm, self-assured leader. She continues:

CAMAE: . . . For what it worth, I know God like you. The real you.

KING: Do He really?

CAMAE: She likes you.

KING: She? (21)

Taking a contemporary feminist perspective, Hall labels God as “She” much to King’s surprise; but he is intrigued when Camae adds, “She told me She like you. That if you was in heaven, you’d be Her husband” (21). Like many men, King is tempted by Camae’s beauty and the She-God’s “like” for him even while he suspects Camae of sending tapes to his wife. King comes to accept the female identity of God, and when Camae tells him “You gone need to pass off that baton . . . (*Beat*),” King asks Camae to tell Her, “. . . I won’t ever drop this baton again” (30). He fears the future and wants to live longer than she indicates is his destiny. Eventually, King speaks to God on the phone:

KING: God, Ma’am, You don’t sound like I thought You’d sound. No, no, no. Pardon me, if that offends. I like how You sound. Kinda like my grandmamma. Well . . . it is a compliment. I loved her dearly . . . I love You more, though. (32)

King is no different than any other man who might find himself talking to the Almighty.



Preacher or not, the hierarchy is clear here. He begs her to let him have more time, and becoming increasingly exasperated, behaves like many others would:

KING: To die. HUH! Of all places! Well, I am angry. . . . I have continuously put my life on the line, gave it all up. Gave it all up for You and Your Word. You told me, that'd I'd be safe . . . . God, how dare You take me now. NOW! I beg of You, I plead—God?

Ma'am? God? *(Long heavy silence.)*

CAMAE: *(Whispers from the corner.)* What She say?

KING: I think . . . I think She hung up on me. (33)

Hall injects humor into a story wrought with sorrow, anger, bitterness. But as actress Ruby Dee said, it is sometimes best to cope with tragedy through humor (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*). Hall continues in this vein with a scene where Camae and King have a pillow fight which evolves into a tickling match, and King is on top of her, on the bed.

KING: I never thought death would be so beautiful.

CAMAE: Sometimes. Tonight's a good night. I remembered my rouge. *(Beat.)*

KING: Camae?

CAMAE: Yes, Preacher Kang.

KING: Hold me. *(Beat. King's eyes well with tears and this strong grown man dissolves into the child no one ever saw. He slides down on top of her. Crying. Crying his heart out. Sobbing. And Camae holds him. And rubs his back as if he were a child.)* (35)

All people must face their mortality, and as great a man as he was, King was no different than the rest of us in this way. Camae finally shares the story of her own passing:

KING: But I thought angels were perfect.

CAMAE: You perfect?

KING: No.

CAMAE: Then why should I be? Honey, I've robbed. I've lied. I've cheated . . . But what I'm ashamed of most is I've hated. Hated myself. Sacrificed my flesh so that others might feel whole again. I thought it was my duty. All that I had to offer this world. What else was a poor black woman, the mule of the world here for? Last night, in the back of a alley I breathed my last breath. A man clasped his hands like a necklace 'round my throat. I stared into his big blue eyes, as my breath got ragged and raw, and I saw the hell this old world had put him through. The time he saw his father hang a man. The time he saw his mother raped. I felt so sorry for him. I saw what the world had done to him, and I couldn't forgive. I hated him for stealing my breath. (36-37)

This man, with his blue eyes, and presumably white, brings racist masochism to the forefront of the conversation—and forgiveness is not an option for Camae. God was not pleased: “She was just soooo disappointed in me” (37). When Camae opens her file and realizes her assignment is to visit King on his last night, she says, “I thought you was gone be perfect. Well, you ain't, but then you are. You have the biggest heart I done ever known” (37).

KING: Will I die at the hands of a white man, too? (Beat)

CAMAE: Yes. Speak by love. Die by hate.

...

KING: How?

CAMAE: Surrounded by those who love you.

...

KING: Will it hurt?

CAMAE: You won't feel the hurt. The world will. (38)

In this line's simplicity, Hall speaks to the vastness of King's life's impact. Camae's lines a few moments before, "Speak by love. Die by Hate," cry out the injustice of the crime, the incongruity of lives lived, and the universal suffering which ensues when one who lived to love is lost to violence. Eli's declaration regarding Solly Two King's death, "You live right you die right" is, tragically, not to be counted upon.

Camae assures King there will be others "[t]o carry on the baton" and at his insistence, agrees to show him what will happen the next day. "Let's take you to the mountaintop" (38). Hall incorporates media at this point in the play. Images appear on the set showing King on the balcony, blood stains outside of Room 306:

A worker wipes away the blood but not before Jesse baptizes his hands on the balcony/  
*The baton passes on . . . Memphis burning/ Cities burning/ Vietnam burning/ Coffins*  
*coming home/ Another Kennedy killed/ The baton passes on . . . Black raised fists/*  
*Olympics/ The baton passes on . . . White children/ Black children/ Crayola-colored*  
*children . . . I'm black and I'm PROUD!/ Jesse for President/ I am somebody!/ . . . Drive-*  
*bys/ McDonald's/ Diabetes/ Iraq/ NBA/ high-paid slaves/ . . . American flags/ And black*  
*presidents!/ The baton passes on/ The baton passes on/ The baton passes on/ The baton*  
*passes on/. (38-41)*

King ends the day, knowing what awaits. In his final moments before dying, he says,

KING: Your time is now, I tell you NOW! The baton may have been dropped. But anyone can pick it back up. . . . The promised Land is so close, and yet so far away, so close and yet so far away so close and yet so—*(In a small pinpoint of light Camae's hand comes from behind King, settling on his trembling shoulder.)*

CAMAE: Time. *(Blackout.)*

*(End of Play)* (42)

Again, the blurring of real history with spirituality is used to address nuances which otherwise would most likely slip away unnoticed. Hall uses this technique as did Wilson, Wolfe, and as do her contemporaries Beaty and Jacobs-Jenkins, amongst others. The effect is to slow a reader down, or in the case of an audience member, to force a pause for thought—for what is one to make of lines blurred? One must sift through the facts, sort the feelings, and determine meaning. Not to engage in such a way is to walk away empty-handed. Through this play, Katori Hall lights a candle for King, and thereby reminds us that he was human, yet he was great—and in so doing, suggests that, perhaps, each of us, though we are also human, might achieve something of significance in our own lives, if we try.

### **Dominique Morisseau's *Detroit '67*:**

#### **A Different Kind of 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

Fifty years after riots broke out across the country, issues related to racial conflict continue to make the headlines. The themes of corruption and police brutality dominate in Dominique Morisseau's play, *Detroit '67* produced at the Public Lab at The Public Theatre in New York City in 2013, which sadly renders the play almost timeless as the issues then pertain so much to those of today.

While the path to prison is the subject of Dominique Morisseau's play, *Pipeline*, her play, *Detroit '67* centers on Chelle and Lank, sister and brother, a couple of their close friends, Sly and Bunny—all of whom are black—and a visitor, Caroline, who is white. Much like the story of *Raisin*, Chelle and Lank have inherited money from their father who recently passed away. Paralleling *Raisin* extensively, Chelle wants to use her inheritance for a college education (for her son, Julius), but Lank wants to open a bar with his friend, Sly. (Beneatha hopes to attend college, and Walter Lee aims to open a liquor store with his friend in *Raisin*.) Tension arises when, as in *Raisin*, Lank goes and spends all the inheritance on his own dream, risking losing it all. Lank wants to be in a business “Doin’ for myself. Finding somewhere to really be somebody and have something that no one can take from me.” He wants to own versus be owned—and does not want to follow in his father’s footsteps working at Ford Motor (52). This is almost a carbon copy of Walter Lee. All of these strong likenesses do not put Morisseau in a position of being described as one who creates unique storylines or even unique characters, but her use of language—both the vernacular of the “ghetto” and her ability to address complex issues succinctly demonstrate her writing talents.

Chelle argues with Lank that the home they have inherited from their parents and the life they have is good enough, that the money is best invested in the next generation’s education. But Lank insists that they should strive to build something of greater significance, that they should use the family money to increase their financial power. Speaking to Caroline, the mysterious guest whom Lank and Sly rescued from the side of the road after she’d been terribly beaten by a man who they later learn is a corrupt black officer, Lank says, “This bar I got goin’ . . . they didn’t believe I was gonna be the owner. They beat on us to keep us aimin’ low. Soon as we aim high, they know Detroit gonna be a nigger city and not theirs. I’m gonna show them what’s what

when I got my own spot” (71). Such dreams contrast with the realities of life as evidenced when Chelle addresses Caroline, who has developed a connection of sorts to Lank.

CHELLE: I know what it mean to have somebody like you get into his skin. He start believing things in this world is different that they really are. He start believing it’s possible to be you. To live like you. To dream lie you. And it ain’t.

CAROLINE: How do you know it’s not possible?

. . .

CHELLE: . . . [O]utside this basement tell a different story. Lank got his eye on the sky but Detroit ain’t in the sky. It’s right here on the ground. A ground with a lot of dividing lines. We on one side and you on the other. (83)

The conflict between the conservatives in the play who believe, in this case, that one should be satisfied with the status quo and that in fact no change is possible compared to the idealists who believe anything is possible lives on, with each having reason to believe what they do. These “dreams” are pervasive throughout African American plays and are indicative of the strong sense of hope African Americans hold despite the innumerable and entrenched obstacles. Yet these aspirations represent something more than this. They provide a beacon to the next generation, something to work toward by those who will commit themselves to creating a socially just society.

Ultimately, Caroline leaves town out of fear her white presence in a black ghetto home will cause more trouble for the family who took her in after she had nearly been beaten to death. Sly is murdered shortly afterward by the National Guard officers who see him running after police. They shoot, and Sly is dead. They do not know that it was the police who had threatened

to burn down the bar that Sly and Lank had just purchased that, in fact, Sly had chased the police away in an attempt to protect both the substantial investment he and his friends—Lank and albeit unknowingly, Chelle—had made. His newly confessed love to Chelle inspired him to take a stand against the police, only to be misunderstood by government officials, costing him his life. In the end, Chelle honors Lank’s—and Sly’s—dream by supporting the effort to open the bar. The money for her son’s education has been spent by her brother, and she can do nothing but transform her disappointment to forgiveness and move forward.

CHELLE: . . . You start somethin’, you got to finish it. Nothin’ wrong with dreamin’, Lank. *(beat)* It’s still standin’ ain’t it?

LANK: Yeah . . .

. . .

CHELLE: You tell them folks . . . when they ask. You tell ’em Sylvester wasn’t no looter. Tell them he was a businessman. A dreamer. That’s what he was . . . what you both are . . .

LANK: I will . . .

CHELLE: And you . . . call the place Sly and Lank’s, will you? (92)

Her only remaining dream, putting Sly’s name first to honor the man who loved her, is the one small request she asks her brother to fulfill. Dreams, however small, remain important for each of us to have; they provide opportunities to hope, to prove oneself, and thereby, to improve our human condition. It is this focus on the fortitude to overcome significant obstacles including racism while holding onto one’s dreams in *Detroit ’67* that is significant when considering the theme of the present era of African American theatre, that of achieving social justice from the

stage.

### **Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's Sick Bay as *War* Zone**

Tensions erupting into full-blown conflict between siblings is a theme to which many people, sadly enough, can relate. Building upon that which is familiar, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins takes his characters into the realm of the fantastical—complete with apes on stage—yet somehow vaguely familiar—in his play, *War*. Issues of race, the definitions of family, and elucidating the meaning of intelligence are premises for this provocative play.

Jacobs-Jenkins has written plays which have earned him significant accolades including *Neighbors* (2010) and *War* (2014). In *Neighbors*, Jacobs-Jenkins reengages with a theatrical practice which has, since the last half century, been viewed as abominable by some and distasteful at the very least by others. A black family moves into a neighborhood and suffers extreme reactions from the current residents (much as are destined to erupt in *Raisin*). In this case, however, vocation rather than race is the issue. The tension is rooted in the blackface that the new arrivals wear: this black family performs minstrel shows. In revisiting this aspect of African American theatre, Jacobs-Jenkins turns history on its head and forces the discussion of what is considered socially inappropriate and who has the authority to make that assessment.

Set in the hospital room of the family matriarch, *War* opens to Roberta lying in bed after suffering a severe stroke. Her daughter, Joanne, and son, Tate, argue over who should be in charge of her care and criticize one another for how each is handling the situation. The arrival of their father's former lover, Elfriede, with whom he had an affair while stationed in Germany and their son, Tobias, complicate matters. Roberta had invited them to visit—she'd even paid for their airfare on whims of curiosity and generosity. Not only is there a family feud between the



siblings, Tate demands that others leave: Elfriede and Tobias are not considered family despite their shared father. The reference to World War II broadens the scope of war in this script, similar to Beaty's use of the macro-micro lenses employed in *Emergency* discussed previously.

To add insult to injury, Tate cannot seem to get Elfriede's name right. He calls her "Frieda," "this woman," and "what's her name." This is the experience of some who find that whites cannot distinguish between people of color as readily as they can between whites, for instance. According to Iris Kuo, a journalist and Knight-Bagehot fellow at Columbia University, "This phenomenon has a name — psychologists call it the 'cross-race effect,' a well-replicated finding that people are better at telling apart faces of their own race than those of another race." One of the tools of oppressors is to make the "other" unidentifiable, invisible, and therefore, those who should not be acknowledged. The message is, "You have no value to me." Again, Jacobs-Jenkins addresses a social issue which is often brushed aside but is in fact highly offensive at best, and highly destructive at worst.

Like her ancestral storytellers, Roberta steps away from the hospital bed and addresses the audience members, attempting to engage them throughout the play.

ROBERTA (*To the audience*): What is happening? What is this? (*A "spell," then*) Oh, hello. (*Beat.*) Do we know each other? (*A smaller spell, then*) Wait, did I just say something? What did I say? I can't remember . . . I can barely see you, but some of you seem familiar . . . Can you tell me where we are? (51)

Unlike a griot whose audiences join in in the dialogue and story, Roberta is unsuccessful in her effort to elicit a response from her spectators. In contrast to Beaty's characters who are forced to remember, Jacobs-Jenkins touches on mental illness due to a stroke, the symptoms of which as

presented here are all too familiar to those who have witnessed someone struggling with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia. Roberta cannot remember much—and what she remembers evokes capricious feelings from sorrow to joy, clarity to confusion. Juxtaposed with indigenous African dramas, Jacobs-Jenkins employs lengthy monologues for the character Roberta in *War*. A short excerpt follows:

ROBERTA: My son Tate! Ooooh, I love him! He's so handsome; and so so so smart . . . .  
Wait—do I have a daughter? I forgot about her. Joan? Jo . . . Anne? Joanne. Did I name her that? Wait—do I like Joanne? . . . Does Joanne like me? . . . . Joanne hates me? Or hated me. When she was a child, she would walk into a room see me, turn right around and walk out. Literally. She was always closer to her father. We stopped talking when she got to college. I don't know why. (55-56)

The schism between mother and daughter embittered both, but now, in the hospital, Joanne offers her the best care she is capable of giving. Despite efforts to be attentive, vacuous anger consumes both Joanne and Tate, due entirely to a lack of communication.

The distressing truth becomes increasingly apparent with Roberta's declaration that her mother had always loved her home, and had taken great care of it until removed by her own children in her final days. "But she loved her house. She loved her garden. Almost more than she loved me. She spent at least an hour a day cleaning and another hour a day weeding . . . . I think she felt betrayed, she did, that we kept her from her handiwork" (58). Mama feels the same way in *Raisin*. In response to Ruth referring to the apartment as a "rat trap," Mama explains that she and Big Walter had originally planned to live there only a year.

MAMA: We was going to set away, little by little, don't you know, and buy a little place out in Morgan Park. We had even picked out the house. (*chuckling a little*) Looks right dumpy today. But Lord, child, you should know all the dreams I had 'bout buying that house and fixing it up and making me a little garden in the back—(*she waits and stops smiling*) And didn't none of it happen. (*dropping her hands in a futile gesture*). (114)

In both instances, the mothers crave owning their own homes in which they can provide a loving environment for their families, but the actualization of their dreams proved elusive. One can only hope that Mama finds the new home in the white neighborhood better than that in which Lorraine Hansberry herself grew up and where her mother had to stand sentry through the night.

Communicating one's private wishes, hopes, and aspirations—indeed, communicating anything at all—can be challenging even in the best of circumstances. The fact that the apes in the play communicate most clearly with Roberta offers supreme irony. Though they use a kind of sign language, their responses are broadcasted onto a screen on the set (similar to the use of the screen in *The Mountaintop*) which both Roberta and the audience can read. The leader of the apes, Alpha, tells her he wants her to stay and teach his comrades her language but by the time Roberta decides she will, it is too late.

ROBERTA: Okay, Roberta. Remember how you got here. You were dreaming before. You fell asleep at the zoo and then you woke up and you were in the hospital. Your sister . . . (*Beat, realizing*) I was in the hospital. Am I sick? Am I dead? (*Looks around*) I wasn't dead before. I was here. (*To the audience*) You're still here. Everything is the same. But there's no . . . / *Beat, in which she looks at Alpha*. Am I dead? (*Beat, realizing; the audience*) No. You're dead. You're the dead. But what am I? I'm not dreaming.

You're the dead. *(Puts it together)* Oh ... Jeez, okay. *There is a beat or two, as Roberta stands there. Quietly she leaves the stage, comes into the audience. She sits down. The lights cross-fade to darkness.* (64)

...

ROBERTA: This isn't so bad ... What makes you so afraid, I wonder? ... Y'all have any thoughts?

SOMEONE: Shhhh!

ROBERT: You shhhh! I was just trying to have a conversation?

SOMEONE: Shhhh!

ROBERTA: SHHHH!

*Ape noises come from the audience over the following:*

SOMEONE: SHHHH!

ROBERTA: SHHHH!

SOMEONE: SHHHH!

*Alpha enters and comes down to the edge of the stage, as if he's just heard something. He listens, but there is nothing there. Eventually, he wanders off.* (65)

Her initial questions and comments to those sitting nearby are simply met with "Ssshhh ..." — and then the house goes silent. Conversation over. The final scene focuses on the quarrelsome family at the zoo. They have made peace and are at the ape exhibit.

TOBIAS: They are so boring. They just sit there.

MALCOLM: We're just sitting here.

TATE: Yeah, but they're trapped.

*Beat.*

ELFRIEDE (*Sniffs for a bit, then*): *Es stinkt hier. (It stinks here.)*

*Something about this makes Tate laugh a little before they all settle in to watch the apes.*

*The apes are apparently doing things that please them. Tate laughs in recognition.*

*Joanne sees the same thing, shares it. Then Malcolm, Elfriede, and Tobias. At some point, they look at each other; sort of laughing at what they see.*

*END OF PLAY. (65)*

The pairing of caged apes with the black family is another provocative technique by Jacobs-Jenkins which confronts the racist stereotypes of black individuals as monkeys, and evokes images of entrapped and bound slaves. Indeed, Roberta shares that she had never wanted to go to Europe because “Last I heard they were still calling us monkeys” (56). Roberta’s sentiment is not off base. Roscoe Lee Brown addressed this stereotype’s evolutionary implications in his interview about the Black Theatre Movement:

People were wondering if blacks as a people—and we as actors—people questioned [if we were] sufficiently evolved politically, socially [so we would not be] doing irreparable harm to the black rights movement (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*).

Klein’s concern (as expressed in his interview for the documentary *Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*) over stereotypes being reinstated or reinforced by blacks themselves is relevant to Jacobs-Jenkins plays *War* and *Neighbors* as well. Beatty also shares this concern and suggests that black entertainers and “Superstars” consider the impact they have on others, particularly children. Negative stereotypes should never be taken lightly, especially given how easily racist groups latch onto such simplistic conceptions which can lead to an escalation of violence. Such

heinous behavior is often directed against people of color as well as minorities of all kinds as evidenced by the increase in hate crimes since the most recent presidential election. According to New York journalist Clark Mindock at the *Independent*, a news agency in the United Kingdom, the number of hate crimes surged by at least 300 in 2016—after years of declining since 1996 when records on the topic were first tracked. Indeed, according to the *PBS News Hour*, “Within ten days of Donald Trump’s election, the Southern Poverty Law Center tracked 900 bias-related incidents against minorities.” Jacobs-Jenkins’ character Tobias is a clear illustration of the danger inherent when one chooses not to acknowledge the humanity of a stranger, of an “other.”

Roberta’s and Alpha’s attempts to understand each other are as unproductive as those made by her children to communicate with one another, and call into question what it really means to communicate as well as what defines civility. In the final scene above, the humans watch the apes and describe them as “boring” but realize they are doing exactly the same thing as those who are caged—“just sitting.” The similarities are striking: the humans sit paralyzed by societal expectations and entrapped by their own definitions of what constitutes family. Irony twists the end of the play further: what the people actually communicate is not addressed through words but through the sudden primitive vocalized and unvocalized sounds emitted from their mouths. Humans call it laughter.

Jacobs-Jenkins puts issues of race, family, and evolution onstage to consider what is justifiable, as well as what is tolerable socially and what is not. The separation of family members, as witnessed in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, *The Brothers Size*, *Detroit ’67*, *War*, and *Emergency*—indeed, the separation of the human family—remind audience members of their own pain—and the need to deal with that in some productive and healing way.

This is an exciting time in theatre—particularly in African American theatre. With the

work being done by cutting edge authors addressed above, the issues impacting African Americans today are being brought before an increasingly diverse audience. From Broadway, Off-Broadway, and Off-Off Broadway, to regional theatres, university and collegiate theatres, community theatres and even those in grade schools, these plays are reaching audiences who need to hear the messages of these playwrights, to see African Americans onstage, and to hear what is, for many, their own stories told with more frequency. As Joseph Papp, a white producer and director, puts it, “The futures of the black theatre and white theatre are intertwined, and reflect the future of society” (*Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*). For America to survive, the breach between races must be fused; for America to thrive, the union of races must be nurtured. Until this occurs on a broad scale nationwide, we are not capable of achieving our potential as a nation.

Likewise, Beaty’s contemporaries might heed Beaty’s more action-oriented approach in addition to publishing and producing to find new ways to engage with their audiences. Until they do, the power of their work is limited by the scope of their audience and the audience’s readiness to engage with the content of the play in- and outside of the theatre.

**“We can overcome if we change the way we see,  
see ourselves, see our past, see our possibility.”**

**–Daniel Beaty, *Emergency***

# CONCLUSION

## THEATRE AS A SYNERGETIC SANCTUARY

African American theatre has a long history with roots reaching deep into African storytelling and indigenous drama. Black theatre artists in this country have used their collective voices to speak to the oppression experienced, the need for change, and, in some instances, have suggested ways to address racism. The most ardent attempt in this last effort is that of actor-singer-writer-activist, Daniel Beaty who aspires to rectify these differences beginning with individuals and communities thereby spreading salve over the nation's wounds.

A performance of *Emergency* can capture the attention of an audience so as to inspire scholarly research and perhaps even social change. Through a thorough analysis of the themes of freedom and bondage, language, identity, and the variety of perspectives within the African American community, the play *Emergency* is held by this author to be a significant modern drama.

As a mechanism, theatre is a medium capable of enhancing students' self-esteem to the point of transformation as it did with Beaty. As an art form, theatre provides opportunities to address serious contemporary social political issues through programs such as *I Dream*, and even encourage reflection by individuals who witness the performance to reevaluate their own roles in American society, ultimately contributing to more equitable policies for all Americans and thereby precipitate healing a nation so long divided by racism. Beaty encapsulates the value of theatre in his interview with Kraybill this way:

Theater is almost like a sanctuary. It's one of the few places, other than church, where people gather to have an experience as a community. One person, in the case of a solo



show, or a group of people, in the case of an ensemble play or a musical, stand before a group to lead them into that experience, to provoke them to think, often to uplift and inspire them. In a world with so much technology, it's vital to have the dramatic arts to remind us of that special energy that can exist between people in live performance. (44)

Indeed, it is that sanctuary of community in times of need and suffering where healing often occurs. There is a time, there is a place where this happens, and can happen for all. It is the world of theatre, and can be created simply by knocking on the stage door.

*Knock knock.*

Who's there?

Beaty.

*Knock knock.*

Who's there?

*We are.*

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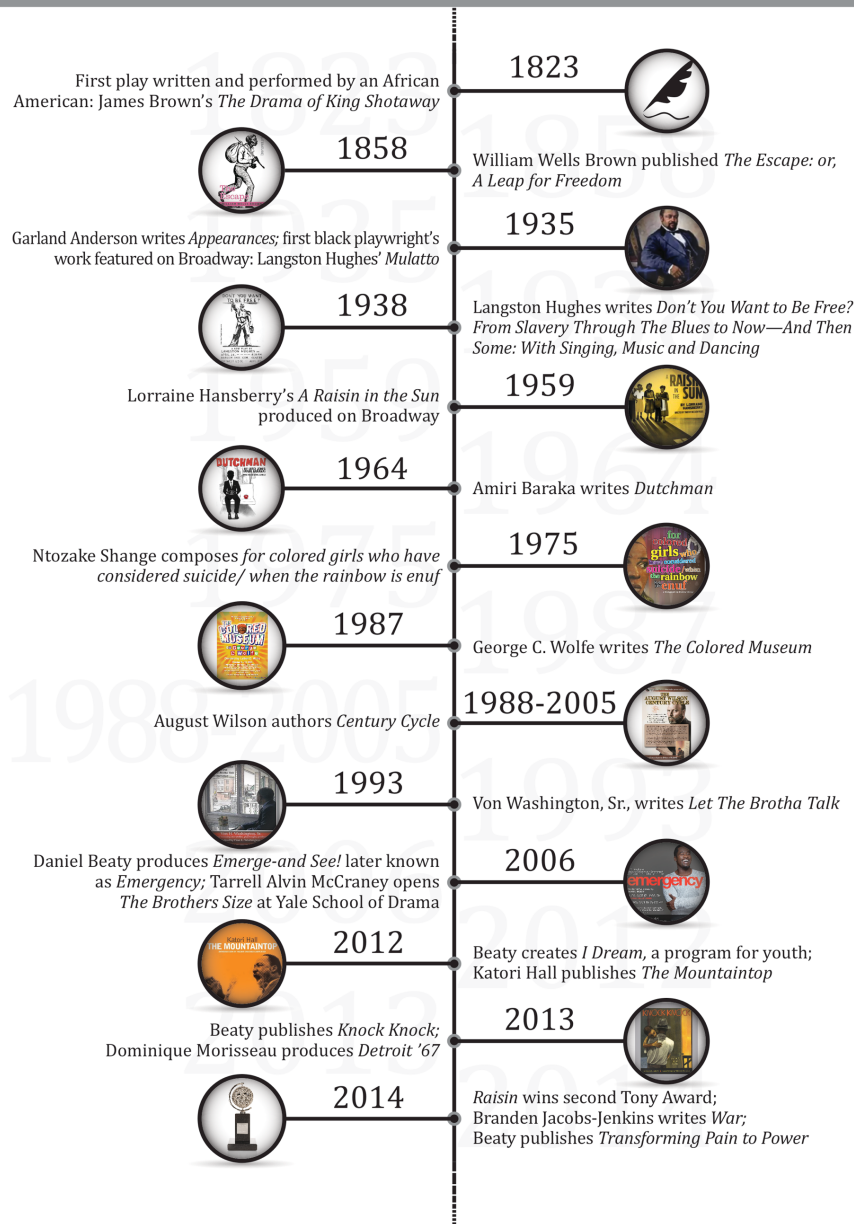
## APPENDICES



APPENDIX A:

TIMELINE OF SEMINAL PLAYS BY  
AFRICAN AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS

**APPENDIX A:  
TIMELINE OF SEMINAL PLAYS BY AFRICAN AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS**



APPENDIX B:

A TIMELINE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WRITING  
AS IT PERTAINS TO THEATRE

## APPENDIX B:

### A TIMELINE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WRITING AS IT PERTAINS TO THEATRE

- In the beginning: Griots tell stories in African cultures
- 1800s: Code songs, minstrelsy develops
- 1820: William Brown establishes first African American Theatre Company, *African Company*
- 1820: African Globe Theatre opens in New York City
- 1823: James Brown writes *The Drama of King Shotaway*
- 1827: African Globe Theatre closes
- 1828: Thomas Rice began tradition of blackface minstrel shows
- 1858: William Wells Brown writes *The Escape: or, A Leap For Freedom*
- 1870: Minstrelsy begins to decline
- 1912: Lafayette Theatre opens in Harlem
- 1919: The Great Migration; “The Red Summer”; Claude McKay writes “If We Must Die”
- 1920-1939: Harlem Renaissance; Marcus Garvey founds Universal Negro Improvement Association and encourages blacks to return to Africa
- 1935: Garland Anderson writes *Appearances*; Langston Hughes’ *Mulatto* first black play to be produced on Broadway
- 1938: Langston Hughes writes *Don’t You Want to Be Free? From Slavery Through The Blues to Now—And Then Some: With Singing, Music and Dancing*
- 1940: Richard Wright publishes *Native Son*
- 1951: Lafayette Theatre closes
- 1959: Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* produced on Broadway
- 1964: Amiri Baraka writes *Dutchman*
- 1966: Maulana Karenga created Kwanzaa
- 1967: The Ford Foundation co-sponsors launch of Negro Ensemble Company
- 1968: Verna Dee founds National Black Theatre
- 1969: Baraka writes *Slaveship*
- 1975: Ntozake Shange writes *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*
- 1978: BBC cancels last minstrel show
- 1987: George C. Wolfe writes *The Colored Museum*
- 1988: August Wilson authors *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*
- 1993: Von Washington, Sr., writes *Let The Brotha Talk*
- 2003: Wilson publishes *Gem of the Ocean*
- 2005: Wilson completes *Radio Golf*
- 2004: *Raisin* wins Tony Award
- 2006: Daniel Beaty produces *Emerge-and See!* later known as *Emergency*; Tarrell Alvin McCraney opens *The Brothers Size* at Yale School of Drama
- 2010: Branden Jacobs-Jenkins writes *Neighbors*
- 2012: Beaty creates *I Dream*, a program for youth
- 2012: Katori Hall publishes *The Mountaintop*
- 2013: Dominique Morisseau produces *Detroit ’67*

2013: Beaty publishes *Knock Knock*

2014: *Raisin* wins second Tony Award; Jacobs-Jenkins writes *War*

2014: Beaty publishes *Transforming Pain to Power*

APPENDIX C:

*EMERGENCY* MEDIA RELEASE  
FESTIVAL PLAYHOUSE OF KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

## ***Emergency Sounds the Siren: See What Is! See What Can Be!***

*“We can overcome if we change the way we see, see ourselves,  
see our past, see our possibility.”*

– Daniel Beaty from *Emergency*

Imagine a slave ship mooring itself in the South Haven harbor today. Imagine the reactions you and others would have to such a sight. What would you do? What would you say? ***Emergency*** by Daniel Beaty will be presented Saturday, October 22 @ 7:30pm in the Dalton Theatre in the Light Fine Arts Building at Kalamazoo College located at 139 Thompson Street. The show’s sponsors are the Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership With/Out - ¿Borders? II Conference and Festival Playhouse Diversity Guest Artist Series.

In this 80-minute piece, which includes slam poetry, multi-character transformation, and song, Beaty portrays a cast of 40 characters including a homeless man, a scientist, a republican business executive, a street vendor, and an 11-year-old boy from the projects all responding to a slave ship which emerges in front of the Statue of Liberty in NYC. Originally produced at The Public Theatre in NYC, *Emergency* was a 2006 Obie award-winner and is considered by many critics to be one of the most explosive one-person shows ever performed. The performance will be followed by an audience talkback and book signing.

Beaty knew from a young age he wanted to be a performing artist. When his second grade teacher asked for someone to recite James Weldon Johnson’s “The Creation” for the school assembly, Beaty volunteered—and “felt an immense joy. I knew I wanted to have this experience as much as possible even at that young age.”

Seeing a film of Dr. King delivering his “I Have A Dream” speech, Beaty says, “I remember seeing him speak with such passion and mastery, literally changing the world with his words, and saying to myself, ‘I want to do that.’”

Not only does Beaty aim to change the world from the stage, he is a teacher and author. “I believe it is the role of the Artist to invest in the learning and development of future artists which is why I teach at Columbia University. I also believe in nurturing creativity at a very young age which is why I write children's books.”

Having won numerous awards for his work, Beaty remains humble: “While I am grateful for the awards I've received, I don't take pride in them or value one over another. I feel deeply honored to make my living as an artist and always experience deep gratitude when the artistic community honors my work.”

More information on Daniel Beaty: <http://danielbeaty.com/wordpress/>

More information on the conference: <https://reason.kzoo.edu/csjl/>

APPENDIX D:  
*EMERGENCY PROGRAM*  
FESTIVAL PLAYHOUSE OF KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

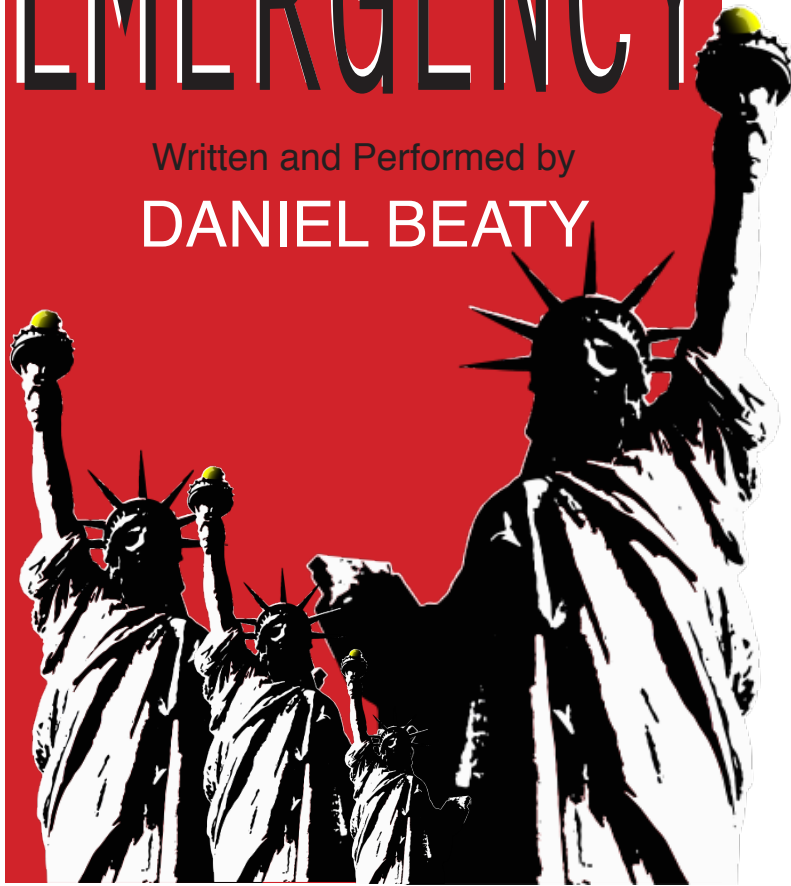


fest  
ival  
play  
house  
2016-17

The Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership  
With/Out - ¿Borders? II Conference  
and  
The Festival Playhouse Diversity Guest Artist Series  
present

# EMERGENCY

Written and Performed by  
**DANIEL BEATY**



KALAMAZOO COLLEGE  
**Festival Playhouse**

Dorothy U. Dalton Theatre, 139 Thompson Street  
Kalamazoo College  
Saturday, October 22, 2016  
7:30pm

The Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership  
With/Out - ¿Borders? II Conference  
and  
The Festival Playhouse Diversity Guest Artist Series  
present

# *EMERGENCY*

Written and Performed by Daniel Beaty

The original production of *Emergency* was produced by The Public Theater in October 2006  
(Mara Manus, Executive Director; Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director)

“We can overcome if we change the way we see,  
see ourselves,  
see our past,  
see our possibility.”

– Daniel Beaty from *EMERGENCY*

*EMERGENCY is performed without intermission.*

If you choose to leave your seat at any time during the performance,  
you will be re-seated at the discretion of the House Manager.

Please turn cell phones completely off.  
Do not text during the performance.  
Any type of photography is strictly prohibited.

Following the conclusion of the performance and  
a very short break, the audience is invited to stay  
for a brief discussion of the play.

Mr. Beaty will be signing books in Dalton Lobby  
for 30 minutes following the performance.

FESTIVAL PLAYHOUSE • KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

***DANIEL BEATY*** is an award-winning actor, singer, writer, and composer, having worked throughout the U.S., Europe, and Africa performing on programs with artists such as Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, Jill Scott, Sonia Sanchez, MC Lyte, Mos Def, Tracy Chapman, Deepak Chopra, and Phylicia Rashad. He holds a BA with Honors in English & Music from Yale University and an MFA in Acting from the American Conservatory Theatre. His ensemble play *Resurrection* received its world premiere production at Arena Stage in Washington D.C. in August 2008 (where it was awarded the 2008 Edgerton Foundation’s new American Play Award); followed by engagements at Hartford Stage, the Philadelphia Theatre Company, and ETA Theater in Chicago. His solo play on the life of Paul Robeson – *The Tallest Tree in the Forest* – directed by Moisés Kaufman premiered at The Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2015. He is a proud member of New Dramatists and an Adjunct Professor at Columbia University. Some of Mr. Beaty’s awards include Peter Ziesler Memorial Award, OVATION Award – Best Lead Male Actor in a Drama, Lamplighter Award from the Black Leadership Forum in Washington D.C., and an Obie Award for Writing & Performance.

Follow Daniel at [www.DanielBeaty.com](http://www.DanielBeaty.com) and on Twitter @DanielBBeaty

***EMERGENCY*** ran off-Broadway to a sold-out, extended run at The Public Theater in the fall of 2006. For this production, Mr. Beaty received the 2007 Obie Award for Excellence in Off-Broadway Theater for Writing & Performing and the 2007 AUDELCO Award for Solo Performance. In the spring of 2007, *Emergency* had a sold-out seven-week engagement at the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles and was awarded two 2009 NAACP Theatre Awards, including Best Actor.

### ***CRITICAL RESPONSE TO EMERGENCY***

“Daniel Beaty’s explosive, affecting solo play *Emergence-See!* may be the most important new American drama since *Angels in America*.”

– Mark Denton, NYTheatre.com

“Glorious! Daniel Beaty’s *Emergence-See!* is mesmerizing, lyrical, timeless theater.”

-Sir Peter Shaffer (*Equus, Amadeus*)

“*Emergence-See!* is brilliant. Daniel Beaty is genius!”

-Phylicia Rashad (*The Cosby Show, A Raisin in the Sun*)

BROADWAY FIRSTS: STORIES OF “OUTSIDER” CULTURAL LANDMARKS  
IN AMERICAN THEATRE  
FESTIVAL PLAYHOUSE OF KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

## **THE ARCUS CENTER FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**

**LEADERSHIP (ACSJL)** is an initiative of Kalamazoo College whose mission is to develop and sustain leaders in human rights and social justice through education and capacity-building. We envision a campus and world where:

- every person's life is equally valued,
- the inherent dignity of all people is recognized,
- the opportunity to develop one's full potential is available to every person, and
- systematic discrimination and structural inequities have been eradicated.

Learn more about us and our goals at

<https://reason.kzoo.edu/csjl/about/>

Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership,

Kalamazoo College, 205 Monroe Street, Kalamazoo, MI 49006.

## **THE WITH/OUT - ¿BORDERS? II CONFERENCE**

**Oct 21-22, 2016 is a CONFERENCE –**

**[UN]CONFERENCE** featuring modules that will include panel discussions, breakout sessions, and performances designed to prompt us to collectively conjure, theorize, decolonize, and map a future we can all thrive in. **AFROFUTURISM & POST-OPPRESSION DESIRES | DECOLONIZING KNOWLEDGE & LIBERATORY EDUCATION | SUSTAINABLE FUTURES | NEXT SYSTEMS AND NEW ECONOMIC POSSIBILITIES** Just some of the conference presenters and speakers are Naomi Klein ~ Bill Fletcher, Jr. ~ Lewis Gordon ~ Adrienne Brown ~ Daniel Beaty ~ Christina Heatherton ~ Peter Bratsis ~ Sunni Patterson ~ Dara Cooper ~ Alice Kim ~ Stephanie Shonekan ~ Prudence Browne

## **THE FESTIVAL PLAYHOUSE DIVERSITY GUEST**

**ARTIST SERIES** is committed to providing culturally diverse art to the Greater Kalamazoo community, made possible by the Dorothy U. Dalton Enrichment Fund. Previous Diversity Guest Artist Series performers include Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Oni Faida Lampley, Jose Torres Tama, Psalmayene 24, and Kalamazoo College alumni Holly Hughes '77 and Lisa Kron '83.

[www.kzoo.edu/theatre/](http://www.kzoo.edu/theatre/)