

A Return to 1987: Glenda Dickerson's Black Feminist Intervention

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Glenda Dickerson (1945-2012) is often recognized as a pioneering Black woman theatre director.^[1] A more expansive view of her career, however, would highlight Dickerson's important role as a playwright, an adaptor/deviser, a teacher, and as this essay will illustrate, a progenitor of feminist theatre and performance theory. This essay offers a brief rumination on how Dickerson made a Black feminist intervention into feminist theatre and performance theory as she became one of the earliest voices to intercede and ensure that Black women had a seat at the table.^[2]

Glenda Dickerson's intervention into feminist theatre and performance theory appears in her critical writings. Accordingly, these essays illustrate her engagement with Black feminist thought and elucidate how she modeled a feminist theatre theory through her creative works. Dickerson, along with other pioneering feminist theatre artists, "reshaped the modern dramatic/theatrical canon, and signaled its difference from mainstream (male) theatre."^[3] Dickerson's select body of essays prompted white feminist theorists and practitioners to be cognizant of race and class as well as gender in their work and scholarship.^[4] Moreover, Dickerson's writings serve a dual function for readers: first, they offer an entryway into her life and creative process as a Black feminist artist. Secondly, they detail her subjective experiences as a Black woman within the professional worlds of theatre and academia.

Feminist Theatre Theory: A Brief Overview of Inclusion and Exclusion

Emerging as both an analytical tool as well as a methodology, feminism has been one of the foremost theoretical apparatuses to shape the field of theatre especially as it has called scholars' attention to the dynamics of gender and sexuality. The scholars and critics, such as those mentioned below, who have contributed to founding and shaping a feminist theatre theory are diverse in their historical ideas, cultural approaches, and theoretical foregrounding. While there is no singular definition or description of feminist theatre theory to encapsulate such a wide-ranging array of positions, a brief overview of the legacies of some of the most significant contributors may help to situate Dickerson's contribution to the field.

Some of the foundational voices to assist in establishing feminism as an area of study within theatre/drama and English programs during the early part of the 1980s include Dinah Louise Leavitt, Helen Krich Chinoy, Linda Walsh Jenkins, and Helene Keyssar. As Elaine Aston notes, their texts had an impact on the field of theatre studies, however, they focused mainly on the playwrights and theatre practitioners who came to prominence during the 1970s. Aston maintains, "Studies of this kind were instrumental in making feminist and/or women's theatre work visible but, to develop this, what was needed [...] was a more fully rehearsed critical response critical frameworks appropriate for feminist analysis and 'looking'."^[5] The scholars to heed Aston's call were Sue-Ellen Case, Jill Dolan and Lynda Hart, among others.

In *Theatre & Feminism*, Kim Solga provides a summary of the ground-breaking studies, including the works of Case, Dolan, and Hart, arguing that their scholarship indelibly changed the field of theatre studies and theatre practice by forging a relationship between feminist theory and theatre/performance. Solga singles out the year between 1988 and 1989 as “a watershed for feminist performance theory and criticism.”^[6] The year witnessed the publication of some of feminist theatre’s major works: Sue-Ellen Case’s *Feminism and Theatre*, Jill Dolan’s *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, and Lynda Hart’s edited collection, *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women’s Theatre*.

As this quick survey suggests, scholars, critics, and practitioners sustained a commitment to deconstructing the landscape of male privilege that positioned women on the margins or, in many cases, excluded them entirely from the histories of theatre and performance. Even though feminist theatre theory advanced theatre studies and practice, most of the earlier scholars and critics to develop a feminist theatre theory were predominantly white women concerned with *gender*, rather than *race* as a determining factor. And even though theatre scholar Sandra L. Richards pressed the issue back in 1991, declaring that it was “time that white women and men began to participate in the project of bringing more black women’s writing and theatre work to critical attention,”^[7] the concerted efforts of white feminists still marginalized the lived experiences of Black women and other women of color. Within early theoretical studies of feminist theatre, the inclusion of women of color seemed an afterthought.

A Return to 1987

Dickerson’s first significant contribution to the burgeoning field of feminist theatre and performance theory appeared in 1987—predating Solga’s “watershed” moment for feminist scholars and artists. During the 1987 pre-conference of the Women and Theatre Program, a focus group of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, Dickerson delivered her groundbreaking speech, “The Cult of True Womanhood: Toward a Womanist Attitude in African-American Theatre.”^[8] With this speech, Dickerson infused a Black woman’s voice into the field of theatre and performance while simultaneously theorizing a Black woman’s subjectivity.

Dickerson made her speech the same year that pioneering Black feminist scholar Barbara Christian wrote her pivotal essay, “The Race for Theory,” in which she suggests that we “read the works of our writers in our various ways and remain open to the intricacies of the intersection of language, class, race, and gender in the literature.”^[9] Just as Christian called for a new way to nuance Black women’s cultural productions (i.e., fiction, poetry, novels, etc.), Dickerson led the charge in theatre to reverse what she identified as Black women being “triply locked out: by class, by race, and history.”^[10] Dickerson’s and Christians’ declarations underscores their engagement with the theory of intersectionality (foreshadowing Kimberlé Crenshaw’s coining of the term in 1989).

Dickerson’s concern with the “silenced voice of the woman of color”^[11] fueled her mission to reclaim and re-center Black women’s voices and image through performance so that they no longer had to “depend on an often-distorted illustration.”^[12] Throughout “The Cult of True Womanhood,” Dickerson also evokes the names of early “race women”^[13] such as Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, and Zora Neale Hurston, as well as more contemporary writers, cultural critics, and activists such as Lucille Clifton, Mary Helen Washington, Eleanor Traylor, and Winnie Mandela. Dickerson’s essay draws on Black feminist theory and literary criticism. As Lisa Anderson notes in *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (2008) and La Donna Forsgren discusses in *In Search of Our Warrior*

Mothers: Women Dramatist of the Black Arts Movement (2018), Black feminist theory and literary criticism helped to propel a new critical language that, in turn, formulated a method to read and analyze Black feminist aesthetics within a plethora of literary and artistic mediums and genres.

Dickerson's "The Cult of True Womanhood" essay also invokes the concept of "womanism." She writes, "I went searching with Alice Walker for 'our mothers' gardens.' That's when I became a womanist. So, naturally I had to incorporate her salty definition. . ." [14] Womanism encompasses the concept of being "Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. [...] Traditionally universalist..." [15] Theatre scholar Freda Scott Giles writes about Dickerson's manifestation of womanism within her works: "Some feminists have given the impression that much of the feminist movement is fixated on the victimization of women; womanism resists that notion. The big picture is liberty and justice for all. The goal of freeing society from racism, classism, and sexism is mutually exclusive." [16] A number of revolutionary Black feminist and womanist writers including Gloria I. Joseph and Audre Lorde have asserted that Black feminism, as well as womanism, offers a globally-inclusive framework. As early as 1979, Lorde called for feminist-activists (regardless of gender identity) to overthrow the ideologies that have contributed to racist, classist, and sexist attitudes and practices both in the United States and abroad. For example, in her essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Lorde contends that feminist theory is not complete "without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians." [17] Lorde's theoretical manifesto calls for a liberatory praxis unequivocally focused on the absence of Black women, poor women, queer women, and third world women's experiences, among others, from larger feminist discourses.

Like Lorde, Dickerson also takes a global perspective with her work. In "The Cult of True Womanhood" she writes:

When you start reading ancient myths and womanist literature and traveling to countries where the people look like you, you gain a so-called global perspective. Not only is the language of oppression the same the world over; the anguish of women is echoed around the world and resonates from continent to continent. The torture of mothers who lose their daughters to rape, war, drugs, poverty; the suffering of women who are tortured and die in Latin American prisons; the untimely death of young women who are killed by drunk drivers or yuppie lovers in New York's Central Park and then twice victimized by the courts and press: these women are sisters in suffering, fixed on the fangs of the two-headed serpent. Their silenced voices, their stilled tongues are symbolized for me in the illegal banning of South Africa's Nomzamo Winnie Mandela, whom the people call "Mother of the Nation." [18]

Seen in this light, Dickerson's artistic mantra mirrors Lorde's manifesto as she strove to create a theatre that materializes what Lorde considers "differences" among women's lived experiences. This appears most clearly in Dickerson's final artistic work, *The Kitchen Prayer Series*, a trilogy of performances inspired by the tragic events of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror. Centered around the question, "What is it like for women all around the world to live with war and terror daily?" Dickerson's triptych interrogates how women from across the globe, navigate a world where war and terror are quotidian experiences.

Several white feminist scholars have recognized Dickerson's contribution to the developing field of feminist theatre studies.^[19] For example, in the introduction to *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* Sue-Ellen Case writes about Dickerson's essay, "The Cult of True Womanhood":

Dickerson amplifies the audacity of that voice and its strength within a critique of the form of the drama – its predilection for heroes – particularly heroes of a certain gender and class. From the pleasures of those audacious roots, Dickerson creates a theatre, as a director, and a theory of the theatre, as a feminist theorist. Dickerson's move illustrates one way in which the social movement and the feminist theorist/theatre practitioner traverse a common terrain – the pleasure of a historical moment, a material condition moving with the gestures of the stage and the dynamics of performative forms.^[20]

Interestingly, Case does not explicitly name race as a factor within Dickerson's theoretical framework. Instead, she focuses on gender and class. However, by calling out the "historical moment, a material condition," as a "common terrain" Dickerson negotiates, Case makes the point that Dickerson's theory, as well as her theatre are formulated through materialist feminism which aims to critique the "conditions of class, race, and gender oppression, and demands the radical transformation of social structures."^[21] Additionally, Case makes an important observation by calling attention to Dickerson's role as an innovative feminist performance maker. As Dickerson laments, "Gone was the pompous director's gaze, absent the royal director's chair."^[22] Renouncing a longing to sit among the "ranks of directors," Glenda Dickerson declared herself a "PraiseSinger." "A true PraiseSinger," Dickerson explains,

is a guardian of the archetypes of her culture's collective unconscious. Her function is not to invent but to rediscover and to animate. From this day forth, I will be concerned not with acts, and scenes and curtains; but with redemption, retrieval, and reclamation. The chair in which I sit will no longer be called the director's chair, but the blood-bought mercy seat. From that seat, my work will be a mission, my goal will be a miracle.^[23]

With Dickerson denouncing the patriarchal throne of the director in her pioneering essay, she emerges as one of the earliest women theatre artists to use a Black feminist lens to reconsider the position of the director and their function.

Final Thoughts

I hope that this essay will shed light on Dickerson's role as an audacious critical theorist and excavate her from the hidden cracks of (theatre) history. A closer look at her other essays – written at various periods throughout her career – would further illustrate her deepening commitment to Black feminist theatre as well as Black feminist epistemology. As both her critical writings as well as her creative works demonstrate, Dickerson challenged conventional modes of theatre making while also using theatre as a platform to bring marginalized, silenced, and forgotten people center stage. Dickerson's scholarly and artistic works offer a model for those looking to subvert the dominant paradigms.

Khalid Y. Long is an assistant professor of theatre and coordinator of theatre studies at Columbia College Chicago. Khalid has published essays in *Continuum: The Journal of African Diaspora Drama, Theatre and Performance* as well as the *Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance*. His forthcoming scholarship includes essays in *Theatre Design & Technology*, *TDR: The Drama Review*, and *Critical Essays on the Politics of Oscar Hammerstein II* edited by Donald Gagnon. Khalid has also contributed essays to *Black Masks*, a long-established black theatre magazine. Khalid's current book project is a critical study of Black feminist artist Glenda Dickerson.

[1] When Dickerson is referenced in studies that address African American theatre or Black women in theatre such as Errol Hill and James V. Hatch's *A History of African American Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) or Anthony Hill and Douglas Q. Barnett's *Historical Dictionary of African American Theatre* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009), it is usually a small survey of her work as a director. Anne Fliotsos and Wendy Vierow's reference book, *American Women Directors of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008) also provides a broad survey of Dickerson's work in the theatre that is premised on interviews Fliotsos conducted with Dickerson.

[2] My larger project in progress offers a richer exploration of Dickerson's career, from her start as a student of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s to her final creative project *The Kitchen Prayer Series* before her untimely death in 2012.

[3] Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 57.

[4] Dickerson's essays include: "The Cult of True Womanhood: Toward a Womanist Attitude in African-American Theatre" which was first published in *Theatre Journal* (vol. 40, no. 2, 1988) and republished in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* edited by Sue-Ellen Case (New York: Methuen, 1988); "Wearing Red: When a Rowdy Band of Charismatics Learned to Say 'NO!'" in *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater as if Gender and Race Matter*, edited by Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); "Rode a Railroad that Had No Track" in *A Sourcebook of African-American Performances* edited by Annemarie Bean (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); and "Festivities and Jubilations on the Graves of the Dead: Sanctifying Sullied Space" in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, edited by Elin Diamond (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

[5] Elaine Aston, "Foreword," in *Feminism and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (New York: Methuen, 2014), ix-x.

[6] Kim Solga, *Theatre & Feminism* (New York: Palgrave), 16.

[7] Sandra L. Richards made this statement in a paper she delivered, "Women, Theatre, and Social Action," at the "Breaking the Surface" conference/festival held in Calgary, November 13-17, 1991. I learned of Richards' paper, and subsequently her quote, from Lizbeth Goodman's book *Contemporary Feminist Theatre: To Each Her Own* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

[8] "The Cult of True Womanhood: Toward a Womanist Attitude in African-American Theatre" was

later published in *Theatre Journal* in 1988 and in 1990 re-published in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, edited by Sue-Ellen Case. I am utilizing the published version of Dickerson's speech and will therefore refer to it as a written essay.

[9] Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique*, no.6 (1987): 53.

[10] Glenda Dickerson, "The Cult of True Womanhood: Toward a Womanist Attitude in African-American Theatre," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1990), 110.

[11] Dickerson, "Cult of True Womanhood" 110.

[12] Khalid Y. Long, "The Black Feminist Theatre of Glenda Dickerson," in *The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance*, ed. Kathy A. Perkins et al (New York: Routledge), 183.

[13] In her book, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, Black feminist studies scholar Brittney C. Cooper defines the phrase "race women" as "the first Black women intellectuals [and activist]. As they entered into public racial leadership roles beyond the church in the decades after reconstruction, they explicitly fashioned for themselves a public duty to serve their people through the diligent and careful intellectual work and attention to proving the intellectual character of the race" (11).

[14] Dickerson, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 115.

[15] Alice Walker, *In Search of Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*, 1st ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi.

[16] Freda Scott Giles, "Glenda Dickerson's Nu Shu: Combining Feminist Discourse/Pedagogy/Theatre," in *Contemporary African American Women Playwrights: A Casebook*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (New York: Routledge, 2007), 141.

[17] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 111. Lorde's essay was first delivered as a speech at a conference in 1979 honoring Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and later published in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa (page missing?). The essay was republished in Lorde's collection *Sister Outsider*.

[18] Dickerson, "Cult of True Womanhood" 115.

[19] Similar to Case, Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement, the editors of *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing as if Gender and Race Matter*, consider Dickerson a "godmother," noting that her "intellectual and artistic courage and generosity have given us permission to think past the limits of our own cultural identification as white women and to begin investigating the way Big Daddy crosses into communities of color," 5.

[20] Sue-Ellen Case, "Introduction," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1990), 4.

[21] Aston, *Feminism and Theatre*, 9.

[22] Dickerson, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 118.

[23] *Ibid.*, 118.

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Table of Contents:

- "Subversive Inclusion: Ernie McClintock's 127th Street Repertory Ensemble" by Elizabeth M. Cizmar

- “Earle Hyman and Frederick O’Neal: Ideals for the Embodiment of Artistic Truth” by Baron Kelly
- “A Return to 1987: Glenda Dickerson's Black Feminist Intervention” by Khalid Y. Long
- “An Interview with Elaine Jackson” by Nathaniel G. Nesmith
- "Playing the Dozens: Towards a Black Feminist Dramaturgy in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston" by Michelle Cowin Gibbs
- "1991: Original Broadway Production of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston's Antimusical The Mule-Bone Is Presented" by Eric M. Glover
- “Ògún Yè Mo Yè! Pathways for institutionalizing Black Theater pedagogy and production at historically white universities" by Omi?mi (Artisia) Green
- "Dancing on the Slash: Choreographing a Life as a Black Feminist Artist/Scholar" by Lisa B. Thompson
- "Newly Discovered Biographical Sources on Ira Aldridge" by Bernth Lindfors
- "Guadalís Del Carmen: Strategies for Hemispheric Liberation" by Olga Sanchez Saltveit
- "A Documentary Milestone: Revisiting Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement" by Isaiah Matthew Wooden

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