

Talking About a Revolutionary Praxis: A Conversation with Black Women Artist-Scholars in the Wake of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter

Nicole Hodges Persley: I want to end this special issue for JADT with a discussion about the praxis of Black artist-scholars and what sustainability looks like in the wake of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter. How do we sustain ourselves as we navigate teaching online, losing people we love, fighting against racial inequality, systemic racism, and for many of us raising families, running small companies, and working full time? How do we imagine a praxis that will allow us to do the social justice work we want to do with our various platforms and stay alive? Errol Hill showed us so much about creating space for interdisciplinary work and juggling the life of an artist-scholar, but his role was very different as a Black man. For Black women working in the entertainment and academic industries, our labor is often contested and invisible. At the same time, we are often charged to help "diversify" our academic institutions in ways that are taxing and distracting from our art-making. So, that's the quick version of what I would like to discuss today. If we can have a quick roll call for the reader giving us your name, title, institution, and a few of the slashes you inhabit as an artist scholar. We'll start with Monica, Stephanie, Lisa and then Eunice. I should note for this interview that Monica and I are past Presidents of The Black Theatre Association. We are all members of BTA. Eunice is the current VP and Conference Planner of BTA for 2021-2022 and will be incoming President in 2023.

Monica White Ndounou: I'm Dr. Monica White Ndounou. I'm an associate professor of Theater, affiliated with Film and Media Studies and African and African American Studies at Dartmouth College, and I am currently in the Boston area. I am also an actor and director and the founding Executive Director of The CRAFT Institute as well as a founding member of the National Advisory Committee for The Black Seed Initiative. Nicole and I are also co-founders of Create Ensemble.

Stephanie Leigh Batiste: I'm Professor Stephanie Batiste, I am an associate professor in the English department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I'm affiliated with Theatre and Dance, Comparative Literature, and Black Studies. I was joint-appointed to Black Studies for more than a decade...then I decided to opt for just one job. But I do extensive research in Black performance and I've written a few plays. I'm a poet, and a performer and theater-maker like the rest of you.

Lisa B. Thompson: I'm Lisa B. Thompson, Dr. Professor, "Play Prof." I'm a professor, playwright, and now emerging screenwriter. As of September 1, 2021, my title will change to the Patton Professor of African & African Diaspora Studies University of Texas at Austin. I'm also affiliated faculty in Theatre and Dance, English, Women and Gender studies, and the Warfield Center for African and African American Studies.

Eunice S. Ferreira: I'm Eunice Ferreira. I am an Associate Professor of Theater at Skidmore College affiliated with Black Studies, Intergroup Relations, and Latin American and Latinx Studies. I do work on translation/multilingual theater, mixed-race performance, theater for social change, and theater of the African diaspora. I'm a director, actor, and specialist in Cape Verdean performance. I'm the Vice President and Conference Planner of the Black Theater Association.

Nicole Hodges Persley: Thanks, everyone. For our readers, I am Nicole Hodges Persley. I am jointly appointed at the University of Kansas in African and African American Studies and American Studies I am courtesy faculty in Theatre and Dance, Women Gender and Sexuality Studies, and Latinx Studies. I also work with the Kansas African Studies Center. I'm the incoming Director of Museum Studies. We have the only masters of African American Studies and Museum Studies in the nation. I'm the Artistic Director of KC Melting Pot Theater in Kansas City, Missouri. I asked us to talk about our affiliations and titles, not as a CV roll call but more so as a way to delineate the multiple slashes that we occupy as artist-scholars who teach and make Black Theater. We all do multi-modal performance work in and outside of academia. In this issue, we have used Hill's centennial to inspire conversations about milestones. Many of you know Hill was at Dartmouth and was a professor of Black theater.

1. Everyone here teaches, writes, performs, and directs Black theatre. Can you speak to your connection to Errol Hill's work and how it resonates in this particular moment for you?

Lisa B. Thompson: I am most taken by Errol Hill's role as both an artist and scholar. So the fact that he was not only a but as a scholar, he did some of the "heavy lifting" for the field of Black theater permits me to hold both of those identities myself. I've not shared this yet, but I'm developing an Artist/Scholar Initiative to make "us " (artist/scholars) more legible. We have to be intelligible to both the theatre community and the academy. For years I've been convening artist/scholars panels at academic conferences (American Studies Association, Association for Theatre in Higher Education, and Black Theatre Association) to make us more visible and intelligible to the academy and to show how our creative work counts as scholarship. The Artist/Scholar Initiative will not only highlight the work of current artist/scholars but it will also celebrate our artist/scholar ancestors such as Errol Hill.

Nicole Hodges Persley: Wonderful. Yes, we need to situate our work within this larger genealogy of Black artist-scholar work. We can just flow here in our response order.

Monica White Ndounou: Considering that I'm on the faculty at Dartmouth right now, and, to the best of my knowledge, the first Black woman to be tenured in the Theater department, Errol Hill paved the way for me in that space. And I do not take it lightly. Also, for those who may not know, there is an Errol Hill collection on campus at Rauner Library, where all of the research materials he collected throughout his lifetime and career are available to researchers. I use it in my courses with my students. For example, I created a course called "The Making of 21st Century Exhibits: Curating a National Black Theatre Museum" a collaboration with Hattiloo Theatre in Memphis, TN. I was awarded a \$50,000 DCAL Experiential Learning Grant which enabled me to take my students to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, where they visited the Black Theater exhibit there. Having learned about Black theater and performance history throughout the term, they returned to campus and used the Errol Hill collection to curate an exhibit on Black Theater on campus. And Grace Hill, Errol Hill's widow, came to campus to see the exhibit, and she brought the family back to see it too. When she reached out to tell me how happy she was to see how we were using the materials, it meant a lot to me, because that was one way to pay homage to his contribution to my development as a scholar and an artist.

Stephanie Leigh Batiste: I remember when I was in a transitional moment in my career when I was moving from a Cultural Studies perspective that was mostly history and literature-based to a career that was also theater and performance-based that Hill's research and scholarly curation were something of a revelation. One of the things I most loved about Hill's Theater of Black Americans (1980) was the tone

and the detail and the specificity and the rigor of the approach. It seemed an approach that was not about integration...that was not about Western theatre...but took Black theater movements and practices on their own terms rooted in African practices and violent colonial histories. And yet he outlined the power of Black theater as a form of historical criticism and protest. It was absolutely foundational for approaches to Black theater that followed. It gave me permission to look in a particular way at what black people were doing in performance in defining Blackness, Black thought, and experience. His was a sophisticated and rigorously argued deployment of a revolutionary consciousness. The grace, directness, and force of his writing, so particular to Hill, was inspiring. When I started looking around for other scholars that were like him, there were few. The links between ritual, Carnival, and drama that he gave us in his research have been so central to performance studies and the connecting of black performance in the Western Hemisphere. His linking of ritual to the stage, which is now such common sense for us, takes us to performance studies and allows us to think about embodiment, identity, performance broadly as social as well as professional practice.

Eunice S. Ferreira: Yes, Stephanie, the scope of Hill's research continues to be a model for so many of us who not only want to talk about performance more broadly but also want to cross oceans to do so! Hill was a model of a scholar artist working on transnational blackness –Caribbean, African, and African American theater. As a first-generation Cape Verdean American, whose creoleness, multiraciality, and notions of blackness are rooted in a rich African diasporic culture, Hill's body of work gave me permission of sorts to pursue research on Cape Verdean theater. I know it might sound a little strange that I felt I needed permission but I remember finding *The Jamaican Stage, 1655-1900* at McIntyre and Moore, a favorite used bookstore when I was a grad student. I still had not settled on my dissertation topic and Hill's book, along with some other aha moments that semester, made me realize, in the Africanist sense of Ngũgĩ's landmark book, that I had not yet finished decolonizing my mind. Since I was not grounded in Black liberation studies as an undergrad and was not necessarily getting the affirmation I needed in my performance studies course, I had to be awakened in a sense, to be shaken out of a Eurocentric mindset that valued specific historiographical approaches and topics. Seeing that blue book looking back at me from that shelf gave me a vision and blessing for my work on the Cape Verdean stage and I'm reminded of that moment every time I turn around and see it on my bookshelf. I think we all need people around us who tell us "go on, do the work, it's important and you're the one to do it" and Hill was one of those voices.

Nicole Hodges Persley: Absolutely, I would agree. The paths that Hill paved for us created a really interesting landscape of African & African diasporic theatre. His legacy charges other artists to pick up the mantle and to follow the clues that he leaves there for us. Particularly, I love the fact that he's not limited. Hill makes us think about blackness in this multicentric way. He left interpretation and imagination open to what Black theater scholarship could be. I think he tells us "Do what you need to do to tell the story you need to tell."

2. I'm wondering if you can talk about your resistance to definitive historical representations of Black Theatre and how you tell the stories of Black Theater in your teaching or arts practice, particularly now as we are all teaching in a converging racial and health pandemics.

Monica White Ndounou: It depends on the course, because I teach black theatre in a lot of different ways. I teach black theatre through acting classes and history, literature, and criticism courses. I may also teach black theatre through a project I'm directing or do something completely different, like the museum

course I mentioned earlier. And so it really depends on the angle that determines what I'm teaching at the intersections. So, for the museum course, I really wanted my students to think about the power of institutions and institution building within the context of Black theatre; to question: who controls the narrative and the institutional framework and resources? And how does that relate specifically to Black theatre? The way I'm teaching black theatre, at this moment, compared to how I may have taught pre-COVID, or even before the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, which is part of a continuum of Black liberation movements, all of that informs the way that I'm going to approach it. Ultimately, I never teach the same course the same way twice.

Nicole Hodges Persley: That's jazz. Billie Holiday said she would never sing the same song the same way twice. Prescriptive and prescient for this moment.

Lisa B. Thompson: I agree. I think we're all adjusting. This special issue comes out at a heightened moment but this is not new terrain. The history of African American theater is intrinsically tied to fights against anti-black violence and quests for liberation even before BLM. It's part of our jobs as Black theatre artists and scholars to make sure folks know that history and the kinds of persistent interventions Black theatre artists have done in the past and continue to do from Angelina Grimké to Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), from Lorraine Hansberry to Charles Fuller, from August Wilson to Lynn Nottage.

Eunice S. Ferreira: Certainly not new terrain, Lisa, but this particular moment emboldened me and my pedagogy in new ways – and yes, it was an intervention! This past fall 2020 when I received a new assignment at Skidmore to teach the second course in our required theater history survey sequence, I decided that Black Theater would provide the framework – that Black, Indigenous and artists of color would take center stage, that I would prioritize artists whose works were rooted in justice and social change. I was also teaching my elective Black Theater course in the same semester and, regardless of the course title, I zoomed into all of my classes that semester as a professor of Black Theater. It was a powerful post-tenure learning moment for me. It was part of my resilience and resistance – to make it all Black Theater – if not in content, then in pedagogy, practice, and in my own sense of calling of what it means to be a teacher during a pandemic within a pandemic.

Nicole Hodges Persley: I think how we approach the subject and teaching is dynamic. And I don't think probably any of us have a singular way that we go about teaching it. For me, Hill's work is a great spine for the body of Black theater and performance. Does it need supplementation for Black women and LBGTQ approaches and content? Yes, of course. For me to give a student who has never had any idea that Black people have been making theatre before a Hill book or anthology means I open a work to them that shows how much Black theater artists have accomplished way before. *A Raisin in the Sun* is usually their central reference point for Black Theater.

Stephanie Leigh Batiste: It's a beautiful spine. I find Harry Elam, Jr.'s *African American Theater and Performance* very helpful. There are a lot of compendiums that strive to start at the beginning and take us to a present. Many feel very conservative to me. In a lot of ways methodologies of theater, study impact the stories about theater that we hear. We see this too, in the archive, in the way that archives are organized. They craft an order of argumentation and organization that sometimes challenges theoretical experimentation in research.

Hill seemed able to do such eclectic work in his career because professionalization of the academic

sphere hadn't reached the level of regimentation what it has today, where you're burdened with producing an extended book-length study, and spend an absorbing five to ten years writing it. And then you start all over again. And so it strikes me that the opportunity for a lot of that variety, the open approach, and sampling that he was accomplishing has changed. I feel like these things are interconnected in your question: history, archive, argument, teaching, and the nature of being a researcher, writer, and producer in the profession.

I find when I teach theater, usually in a literary critical class, that I'm pulling together a hodgepodge of resources to gather what I need. Aligning theatrical and performance studies work to think about blackness is really a curation project for me. One of the classes I teach is called performance of literature, where I teach students an embodied theory of criticism and performance-based in abstract and theatrical jazz techniques. Together we adapt different canonical literary pieces that seem challenging and foundationally theatrical to me, like Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*. I collaborated with Omi Osun Joni L. Jones UT Austin to experiment with Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* -- and we both worked with Toni Morrison's *Sula*.

Eunice S. Ferreira: I had never imagined teaching Black Theater without live theater attendance as part of the students' learning experience. I know that we all had to make that adjustment due to COVID, but even before the pandemic, I had to find new ways to curate, as Stephanie so eloquently stated, experiences for the students. How will I teach Black Theater at a predominantly white institution in upstate New York when I may not be able to depend on the availability of Black Theater in the region? My answer was "look to Black Theater, Eunice, look to Black Theater!" Meaning, I needed to shift my mode of thinking ingrained in me from early undergrad days from the "go see a play" model to centering the very core elements of the expressive black arts – where do we find Community? Ritual? Music? Dance? Visual Arts? Aren't those some of Hill's arguments for a national Trinidadian theater? Speaking of art, we have a gorgeous contemporary museum on campus called The Tang Teaching Museum that has played an integral role in my Black Theater class. Students have created original theater pieces inspired by the artwork of artists of Africa and the African diaspora and performed them throughout the museum. We also unpack ideas about race, class, and access to museum spaces. Through performance as research strategies, ritual, and community building, students study those who have come before them as they also draw from the elements I mentioned to adapt and create their own work. Embodied learning and the visual arts are central elements. So, too, is the need to move beyond the physical or virtual walls of many theater departments in order to teach Black theater.

Lisa B. Thompson: I definitely come at Black theatre history from the viewpoint of an artist first, because I did not train in theater. I trained in cultural studies and wrote my first play in my doctoral program. I learned about Errol Hill doing research for my advisor was Harry Elam, Jr. I'm thankful that I learned about early Black theatre from him, and from conducting research for *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader* that he co-edited with David Krasner. For the kind of courses I teach, there's no anthology in any field of black studies that works for me, so I'm always bringing together essays, books, films, and plays to create what I call "intellectual collages." I understand the importance of us having these foundational documents and Hill also talks about the seminal works, but I also think there are some really beautiful ways in which we can push against that by putting texts from different eras in conversation with each other. I like to disrupt the linear narrative. My foundational texts are more theatrical. My touchstones or bookends that led me as a Black feminist artist scholar are Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide /When the Rainbow Is Enuf* and George

Wolfe's *Colored Museum*. For me, those plays break up notions of the well-made play and gave me the freedom to revel in the brokenness of Blackness as well as the power and grace. I like to discuss and highlight the artists that present that brokenness in theatre, not as a site of trauma but a place to build from and heal. Errol Hill is brilliant, but he's very put together and in a way that I am not. I'm messy and I love the messiness of Black theatre.

Nicole Hodges Persley: Exactly that—I love the brokenness—fragmentation-syncretic approach to Black theater-making performance and scholarship. My work on sampling, and remixing as theoretical prisms through which we can really reimagine identity formation and racial historicity. I love to think about unsettling the messy and multiple histories.

Eunice S. Ferreira: I, too, love the remix and sampling as frameworks and frequently use that on syllabi and exercises. In fact, Nicole, I draw upon your own hip-hop pedagogy in doing so. And in the spirit of #CiteBlackWomen, started by Christen A. Smith, I trust that anyone inspired by "intellectual collages" will cite Lisa B. Thompson!

3. In your practice as artist-scholars, what is necessary for you to sustain the work that you do in this historical moment?

Eunice S. Ferreira: One of the things I needed to do during this pandemic was lean into an amazing community of friends and scholar artists in all sorts of different ways – especially Black women scholar artists in my circle. COVID restrictions and teaching online also provided an opportunity to expand community building for students in my Black Theater course by introducing them to early-mid career scholar artists making good trouble in their work and teaching. So, if it's ok, let me give a shout out to the class visitors who not only gave students a vision of a community of Black scholars but also personally stood in the gap for me when I had several family emergencies this past fall: Shamell Bell, Kaja Dunn, Justin Emeka, Khalid Long, Sharrell D. Lockett, and Isaiah Wooden. I have to lean into community, not competition. The cut-throat academic model is soul-sucking and destructive to my spirit. Nicole, this is one of the many reasons I support the work you and Monica are doing with Create Ensemble. This is why we need The Craft Institute and The Black Seed. Let Black Theater lead the way.

Monica White Ndounou: Thanks, Eunice. So many folks are doing important work. I agree with you about the importance of community. Initially, I was going to say I need a lab, a place where I can experiment and test out the theories I'm developing and encountering in my work and collaborations. But a lab may be too sterile for what I have in mind. I think it's more of an incubator or sanctuary, a safe space for healing and blossoming, a place where I can go and be with my thoughts and work, to commune with other scholar-artists and practitioners to explore the possibilities of our creativity and scholarship in practice.

Stephanie Leigh Batiste: That is a great question! Can I say first that I love that we're deep in theoretical conversation with regard to your concept of sampling. In the Intro to the first collection called *Black Performance I: Subject and Method* that I edited for *The Black Scholar* (Fall 2019, vol. 49.3), I use the concept of "beat juggling" from my colleague, Gaye Teresa Johnson (2013). The beats of songs and samples from familiar tracks actively cut into each other in hip hop DJ practice create a place from which we can look for and retrieve newly framed and different histories that each of those mixed moments embeds. The blended memories and histories become lilypads in time that give us new provocations for

Black identity-making. We break up linear time. Music and theatricality become grounds for self-invention.

Nicole Hodges Persley: Absolutely. I cannot wait to talk to you more about it. I'm excited that *Sampling and Remixing Blackness in Hip-Hop Theater and Performance* is out this fall with the University of Michigan. It has been a long process, but I think it is relative to what we are experiencing in our current moment with performative allyship, self-reinvention, care, etc.

Lisa B. Thompson: I can't wait to read your book, Nicole! What is necessary for me in this moment is working in the community with other artist scholars and building with local Black artists, especially Black women. I can say the same for my scholarship. I'm part of a writing group with an inspiring and supportive group of diverse scholars who have sustained me during the pandemic. I feel so fortunate to have all of these beautiful folks along with me on this journey.

4. Could you share with readers what you need as an artist scholar to stay creative in the midst of converging health and racial pandemics in American history?

Lisa B. Thompson: We have been fighting for such a long time. We are all exhausted. I haven't had enough rest. None of us have especially if you're a Black/artist scholar fighting in two realms to be heard. Watching all of the death unfold around us daily as we also push to make our lives and work visible has been overwhelming. I have been keeping a list of everything I need to stay creative. We need self-care and community care. There are revolutionary possibilities in creativity. We also need time away. We need a funded residency for Black artists scholars. I would like it to create a MacDowell, Millay Colony, Hedgebrook type of space where we can meet, dream, work, and be taken care of—have food delivered to our studios, take long walks, sit by a lake, stare at trees—the whole nine. I would love us to be pampered as we create. I would like it to include childcare if someone has minor children.

There's lots of chatter online about the role of Black art at this moment that I feel is necessary but I'd like for us to have more of those conversations in-house and in-person with other Black creatives and intellectuals. Not because we are afraid of airing our dirty laundry but because having these conversations on social media or whispered behind folks' backs can be damaging. Growth sometimes happens under a microscope or spotlight but it often impedes our evolution and understanding. Let's call folks in ways that nurture and support our collective growth and creativity. That's another form of community care.

Stephanie Leigh Batiste: I agree. I also want our people's art to be seen. I want there to be some kind of a "not YouTube" archive. Maybe this is part of one of the things you're working on *Monica*, a curation, a site of curation, where new artists and artists who can't manage to get themselves on a big stage can share their work in the community. We need places to process these states of ongoing trauma that are not an academic conference or in our scholarship. We need to have a continuing live archive of new and experimental work that isn't being condoned by the mainstream institutions, social and institutional violence, and the status quo. I would like people to be able to imagine themselves as breaking form; as innovating for the stage in ways that are unencumbered by what's needed to sell a ticket. Our practice of being alive is not in producing the same thing over and over again or creating in the same form over and over again. And we know that the black avant-garde has been instrumental in pushing work and becoming the foundation for the white avant-garde in this country, who are celebrated and marked as the threshold for the transformation of form. But that's not necessarily or predominantly where the form has changed. Traditional forms have been manipulated and innovated by Black communities whose works

were appropriated and then re-presented. And so that force of innovation gets stifled and smothered for not having an achievable outlet or the confidence of proclaiming one's own creativity. I worry that artists don't think that there's a future for their work. This moment seems largely nihilistic in our confrontation with these medically and socially annihilating forces. I'm hoping that the digital realm gives us a place for work. And so in that sense, I feel like I want more stages. I want more stage time. I want more production and trained tech support. I want more black actors who feel like they have the time and the energy and access to make work. You know, art, art-making is operating like a privilege, instead of a thought system. I want us to be free to think about theater as a thought system; that drama is like music--if we lose it, something in us dies, I want us to be able to practice together experimentally and vigorously in collaborative learning laboratories.

Eunice S. Ferreira: This question is a difficult one. You asked what do I need and I was raised in a tradition that taught me to always focus on what others need. I am very much wired for being in the community and everything that Lisa and Stephanie said resonates very deeply with me. I try to bring a holistic approach to my teaching and I'm going to take what Stephanie has offered – encouraging students to think of art as a "thought system" and not as a privilege. And I desperately need the resources, space, and time for self-care listed by Lisa. I want to be able to do my work without having to deal with the relentless forces of systemic racism in academia on top of the violence and loss of lives scrolling on my daily news feed. And of course, institutions can assist with practical support such as funding artistic collaborations that we lead, course releases and leaves to do scholarly and creative work or immerse oneself in an intensive. Oh, that sounds so nourishing! But perhaps the most important thing I need right now to stay productive and creative is to not be weighed down by despair and to stay grounded in joy. When I share the call of joy with students, I'm also reinforcing that for myself. Pedagogy rooted in joy. And a retreat.

Monica White Ndounou: We really need the ecosystems of arts and entertainment and their corresponding educational programs to be overhauled, repaired, and carefully curated for any of the work we're doing right now to be sustained. Overhaul education and formal training programs by de-centering work that reinforces white supremacy, institutionalized racism, and anti-Blackness. Rebuilding programs to recognize the intrinsic value of Black people, People of the Global Majority, and our contributions to every aspect of American society and the larger world is more likely to produce scholarship and theatre that more accurately represents the demographics of the nation and the world.

As I learned through our collective work on *The Black Seed*, the philanthropic community can make a big difference by actively addressing an ongoing history of inequitable funding. This is critical when considering, "of the \$4 billion in philanthropic support from foundations to arts organizations, 58% of that goes to the largest 2% of organizations; all white-led. The other 98% of organizations split the last 42% and arts organizations serving communities of color shared only 4% of that pie. The median budget size of the 20 largest arts organizations of color surveyed by the DeVos Institute is 90% smaller than their mainstream counterparts, and more than half of these organizations were operating in 2013 with budget deficits." Formal training, industry practice and funding have to change for the better. If things persist as they are or return to so-called "normal", my work as an artist and educator is at risk and so are the lives and livelihoods of so many of our colleagues and collaborators. This is one of the most consequential moments of our lifetimes and we need to seize it.

Nicole Hodges Persley: Thank you all so much for sharing your musings about your practice as artist-scholars, your engagement with the work of Errol Hill, and the things you are doing to sustain your

practice in the wake of Black Lives Matter and COVID-19. I so appreciate the opportunity to have the cipher with you. I am hopeful that the readers will explore the creative work of each artist here. We are designing new ways to be Black Theater scholars in the 21st century. We are working in multi-modal interdisciplinary ways. We are in and outside the academy. We are in the undercommons of the entertainment industry. Please check out the websites, Instagram, and Facebook pages of our artist-scholars.

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