

# **Dark Tower and the Saturday Nighters: Salons as Themes in African American Drama**

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Salons and magazines establish formidable institutions of aesthetic criticism. Beginning in eighteenth-century Europe, Jürgen Habermas contends, salons and magazines situate where the “lay judgment of a public” arises.<sup>1</sup> A similar intellectually stimulating condition occurred during the Harlem Renaissance. George Hutchinson writes that the Harlem Renaissance emphasized “the emergence of a whole new matrix of magazines” allied with the New Negro movement. According to Hutchinson, magazines were “especially interesting because of the way the clustering of audiences and contributors linked people across boundaries of genres as well as of race.”<sup>2</sup> Magazines have enjoyed scholarly attention because they endure as written archives. By contrast salons, like theatre, have been undervalued largely because they belong to ephemera and oral history. Nevertheless, salons facilitated a forum for artists to evaluate each other’s work. They played a critical role in the clustering of ideas, in linking people across genres, and in influencing themes germane to African American drama. This essay will examine two specific themes symbolized by two representative salons during the Harlem Renaissance.

In 1922, the award-winning author Georgia Douglas Johnson opened her home at 1461 S Street, NW in Washington D. C. for artists. Gwendolyn Bennett described the salon as the “Saturday Niters of Washington.”<sup>3</sup> It was also referred to as the “Halfway House,” because, in Johnson’s words, it was “a place where anyone who would fight halfway to survive could do so.”<sup>4</sup> Langston Hughes reported in *The Big Sea* that the assembled guests, among them Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Marita

Bonner, discussed “poetry and books and plays.”<sup>5</sup> According to Johnson’s friend and fellow playwright Willis Richardson, the meetings often lasted into the following morning.<sup>6</sup> In 1927, A’Lelia Walker, daughter of the cosmetic entrepreneur Madam C. J. Walker, purchased brownstones at 267 West 136<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem. Walker, whom Langston Hughes dubbed “the joy goddess of Harlem’s 1920’s,”<sup>7</sup> converted a floor of her mansion into the “Dark Tower” named after Countée Cullen’s *Opportunity* magazine column. Dark Tower’s walls were festooned with poems by Hughes and Cullen. According to habitué Richard Bruce Nugent, Walker “saw a real need for a place, a sufficiently sympathetic place, in which [artists] could meet and discuss their plans and arts. . . . [Dark Tower] was to have enough quiet dignity to impart weight to the poetry evenings.”<sup>8</sup> The salon was later euphemistically known as “Niggeratti Manor” from Wallace Thurman’s acerbic 1932 roman à clef *Infants of the Spring*. Dark Tower folded a year after its opening as a result of Walker’s financial setbacks and lack of sustained interest among artists. Johnson’s salon, too, declined owing to the Great Depression. Yet both left a lasting impression.

The salons shared the dynamic vision of their hostesses Johnson and Walker and many participants frequented both locales (Madam C. J. Walker’s beauty shop in Harlem, where she produced and sold many of her groundbreaking hair products, also served as a salon for black middle-class women). These salons symbolized two different aesthetic themes in African American drama, the first of which I call the “space of experience” and second the “horizon of expectation.” Space of experience represents works that are experiential and participatory rather than abstract and literary. They represent theatrical performances rather than dramatic texts and are based on vernacular, grass-root folklore. Ralph Ellison describes this type of salon when he says that “Negro folklore, evolving within a larger culture which regarded it as inferior, was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro’s willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as the definition of reality, rather than allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him.”<sup>9</sup> Horizon of expectation is art signifying possibility and transformation. It is literary rather than performative. It, too, is rooted in folk tradition, but it primarily asserts the message of redemption and uplift. W.E.B. Du Bois’s description of the Spirituals best exemplifies this salon concept: “Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs,” he says, “there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins.”<sup>10</sup>

In *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Reinhart Koselleck defines two historical categories—“space of experience” and “horizon of expectation”—from which I draw my analysis. Both categories, he says, contextualize history because “of the way that they embody past and future.” They differ in that space of experience “is present past,” yielding events that “have been

incorporated and can be remembered.” Space of experience emphasizes spatiality over temporality because, Koselleck writes, “it is assembled in a totality, within which many layers of earlier times are simultaneously present, without, however, providing any indication of the before and after. There is no experience that might be chronologically calibrated—though datable by occasion, of course.” Koselleck describes space of experience metaphorically as the process of observing “the glass front of a washing machine, behind which various bits of the wash appear now and then, but all are contained within the drum.”<sup>11</sup> Zora Neale Hurston’s self description in her 1928 essay “How it Feels to Be Colored Me” expresses a similar concept. When Hurston says, “I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red and yellow,”<sup>12</sup> she anticipates Koselleck’s metaphoric collage, items arranged without chronological hierarchy. When Hurston writes in an unpublished essay that folklore is “the boiled down juice of human living and when one phase of it passes another begins which shall in turn give way before a successor,”<sup>13</sup> she anticipates Koselleck’s “present past.” Folkloric performance, as Hurston defines it, is an interaction of ideas and experiences, an intelligibly connected system of recycling that links the past to the present and emphasizes spatiality over temporality. It comprises a kind of social relations grid retaining a core feature that is adaptable yet recognizable. Hurston describes this mix of encouraged innovation and aesthetic continuity in her 1934 essay “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals”:

Beneath this seeming informality of religious worship there is a set of formality. Sermons, prayers, moans and testimonies have their definite forms. The individual may hang as many new ornaments upon the traditional form as he likes, but the audience would be disagreeably surprised if the form were abandoned. Any new and original elaboration is welcomed, however, and this brings out the fact that all religious expression among Negroes is regarded as art, and ability is recognized as definitely as in any other art.<sup>14</sup>

Although her use of the term “folk” was part of a widespread effort to build a distinctive American “folk” expression during the period between the two World Wars, Hurston had a specific meaning in mind. For her, through folklore the African and African American oral traditions are carried through slavery and into the modern age, forming a continuity and basic structural integrity while encouraging creative modifications. The Negro folklore is not, according to Hurston, “a thing of the past,”<sup>15</sup> but rather in the making, an ongoing transaction among individuals and their environment within a circumscribed social space.

Horizon of expectation “is that line behind which a new space of experience will open, but which cannot yet be seen.”<sup>16</sup> Horizon of expectation emphasizes temporality over spatiality. According to Koselleck, horizon of expectation still

“takes place in the today,” yet “it is the future made present; it directs itself to the not-yet, to the nonexperienced, to that which is to be revealed. Hope and fear, wishes and desires, cares and rational analysis, receptive display and curiosity: all enter into expectation and constitute it.”<sup>17</sup> Anna Julia Cooper’s 1892 work, *A Voice from the South*, anticipates Koselleck’s concept of the “not-yet.” At the close of her book, Cooper tells of a former slave who “from the land of oppression once saw the celestial beacon and dreamed not that it ever deviated from due North. He *believed* that *somewhere* under its beckoning light, lay a far away country where a man’s a man.” Cooper states emphatically that “I believe there is existence beyond our present experience; that existence is conscious and culturable; and that there is a noble work here and now in helping men to live *into* it.” Cooper’s view should not be confused with an unrealistic or unrealizable utopian vision, but rather a pragmatic faith in racial uplift or what she calls “nations still in darkness to whom we owe a light.”<sup>18</sup>

Space of experience and horizon of expectation are not mutually exclusive; they have a co-efficiency inextricably bound up with history and progress. It is important to reiterate the fact that many artists of the Harlem Renaissance patronized Walker’s and Johnson’s salons, establishing joint interests transcending any singular idea. Nor did these salons lack antecedents. As Elizabeth McHenry reminds us, Dark Tower and the Saturday Nighters were part of a flourishing tradition of black literary societies that “have historically been crucial to uniting black communities, illustrating the importance of collective endeavor, providing a network of support for African American intellectuals, playing a constitutive role in the formation of American literature, and influencing the development of a black public sphere.”<sup>19</sup> There were other aesthetic debates—Hughes-Schuyler, Locke-Du Bois, for instance—that predominated during the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>20</sup> James Weldon Johnson complicated matters by raising the specter of a “divided audience” for black authors, “an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view.”<sup>21</sup> Notwithstanding these issues, I maintain that the symbolism of each salon represented foundational themes in African American theatre that foretold of things to come.

The Saturday Nighters facilitated a literary style stressing a world made possible if audiences could be compelled to absorb the artistic message. Johnson’s fellow playwright Angelina Weld Grimké wrote *Rachel* in 1916 as an expression of grief over lynching’s brutality and a political piece that lobbied for social change. Grimké contended that if “the white women of this country could see, feel, understand just what effect their prejudices and the prejudices of their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons were having on the soul of the colored mothers everywhere, and upon the mothers that are to be, a great power to affect public opinion would be set free and the battle would be half won.”<sup>22</sup> The participants of the Dark Tower, by contrast, stressed the immediacy of the present. Walker’s salon was in particular home to a ribald young crowd represented in *Fire!!*, the 1926 one-issue journal featuring Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Gwendolyn Bennett, Arthur Fauset, and illustrated by Aaron Douglas.<sup>23</sup>

*Fire!!* was, in fact, originally created in the Harlem apartment of Aaron and Alta Douglas. The apartment—a space comparable to a salon—was a meeting ground where Harlem intellectuals planned literary, artistic, and radical ventures and remained vibrant even after 1937 when Douglas began teaching and living seasonally in Nashville. Douglas's home and Walker's salon would provide spaces for dialogue that spilled over into each other, establishing dynamic sites for synergistic experimentation and politically radical creativity.

*Fire!!* maintained an experiential depiction of art. It contrasted with Locke's collection of essayists in his 1925 landmark book *The New Negro*. Locke placed great emphasis on a "new" culture: "Here in this new body of cultural self-expression," he said, "is the portrait of the changed and changing Negro. When we today call the 'new Negro' is just the composite picture of this new mind and spirit reflecting its influence upon Negro life."<sup>24</sup> He emphasized forward-looking horizon of expectation through emancipatory drama and literature, what David Levering Lewis calls Locke's focus on "highly polished stuff, preferably about polished people, but certainly untainted by racial stereotypes or embarrassing vulgarity. Too much blackness, too much streetgeist and folklore—nitty-gritty music, prose, and verse—were not welcome."<sup>25</sup> The point was to look ahead to a horizon of hope and conciliatory, even interracial culture. *Fire!!* was the opposite, filled with gritty prose and experiential, streetwise characters. In an unpublished open letter on *Fire!!* stationary, Aaron Douglas expressed opposition to homogeny and stated the essential manifesto of *Fire!!*: "the Negro is fundamentally, essentially different from their Nordic neighbors," Douglas wrote. "We are proud of that difference."<sup>26</sup> The difference was marked by the visceral texture of everyday life in a black social environment.<sup>27</sup> The artists of Walker's salon looked to a world free from white patronage and shunned what Arthur Fauset called in *Fire!!* the intelligentsia who "withdraw themselves completely from the tawdry field of life."<sup>28</sup> Turning to the space of experience as grist for their creative mill—Faucet's "tawdry field of life"—the radicals distanced themselves from the "genteel tradition" advanced by their elders and avoided the politics of "racial uplift." *Fire!!'*s proletarian radicalism celebrated bohemian and gay-lesbian lifestyles, which prompted Du Bois to warn that these rebels might "turn the Negro renaissance into decadence," and Locke to assert that "If Negro life is to provide a healthy antidote to Puritanism, and to become an effective instrument of sound artistic progress," it must avoid the "hectic imitation of the 'naughty nineties' and effete echoes of contemporary decadence." In his review of *Infants of the Spring*, Locke cautioned that the book "represents only the lost wing of the younger generation movement."<sup>29</sup> The Dark Tower wing of the Harlem Renaissance staked out alternatives that were as much Greenwich Village as they were Harlem. Examining the works of Zora Neale Hurston and Georgia Douglas Johnson will illustrate the respective themes.

## Space of Experience

Like shouting “fire” in a crowded auditorium, the editors of the avant-garde journal *Fire!!*—Aaron Douglas, Zora Neale Hurston, and others—created an artistic magazine determined to shock the black bourgeoisie out of its perceived complacency. They wanted the black experience in arts and letters limned and untainted by white influence or middle-class interference. Through shock-art, linguistic experimentation (dialect), and bold narratives, the artists and writers in *Fire!!* chaffed at the boundaries established by respectable “New Negro” artistic expectations. Langston Hughes informs us that *Fire!!* did indeed stir outrage when it appeared. He writes in *The Big Sea* that “none of the older Negro intellectuals would have anything to do with *Fire!!*. Dr. Du Bois in the *Crisis* toasted it. The Negro press called it all sorts of bad names.”<sup>30</sup> Arguably the most vilified and profoundly important artist involved in *Fire!!* was Zora Neale Hurston, who represents more than anyone the spirit of the Dark Tower salon. Though it cannot be verified that she attended Walker’s abode in Harlem, Hurston was certainly a fixture of Harlem’s artistic scene, a likely visitor to the Dark Tower, a key player in *Fire!!*, and one of the most radical non-conformists emerging from the Harlem Renaissance. Her concept of drama especially informs the conceptualization of “space of experience,” making her the strongest representative of this genre.

Hurston’s 1934 essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression” is, in my view, the keynote address articulating the manifestation of experience in performance. In this essay Hurston provides a nuanced account of black distinctiveness in the rural South in terms that resonate with the empirical evidence of performance art she sought to systemize.<sup>31</sup> Hurston biographers Valerie Boyd and Robert Hemenway maintain that “Characteristics of Negro Expression” is a “summary” of her late 1920s fieldwork in performance rituals.<sup>32</sup> Under Franz Boas’s tutelage at Columbia University, Hurston analyzed songs, dances, and social gatherings of her African-based culture. Her essay examined, in the words of Lynda Marion Hill, “the social rituals and the verbal art” of African American southern folklore in order “to capture the depth of experience implicit in ordinary expression.”<sup>33</sup> While she published other studies of folklore,<sup>34</sup> “Characteristics of Negro Expression” was her most important theoretical contribution to understanding everyday experiences relative to performance. Rafia Zafar comments on the seminal value of Hurston’s essay: “Long before performance studies entered the academy, Hurston analyzed and practiced what she called the drama of everyday.”<sup>35</sup> “Characteristics of Negro Expression” is therefore the crucial manifesto for experience as a means of black social expression.

Hurston placed great premium on getting as close as possible to the space of experience and transferring it artfully to the stage. As a result, she viewed the experience of the southern rural black community as grossly undervalued. She resisted what she called the “tragically colored” representation of “the sobbing school of Negrohood.”<sup>36</sup> Rather than dwell on Du Boisian Sorrow Songs, Hurston wanted to legitimate the everyday life of black culture by honoring

its exceptionalism and, more importantly, its theatricality and humor. In her unpublished 1934 essay, “You Don’t Know Us Negroes,” Hurston claimed that “most white people have seen our shows but not our lives. If they have not seen a Negro show they have seen a minstrel or at least a black-face comedian and that is considered enough. They know all about us.”<sup>37</sup> The misrepresentations helped popularize twentieth-century “primitivism” and the resurgence of “blackface” that continued to define the “black experience.” Even Depression-era sociological novels and plays by black authors presented dubious representations, which Hurston sardonically called “a prolonged wail on the tragedy of being a Negro” yielding “a catalog of incidents intended to show starkly the pity of it all.” This, she said, is an “insincere picture.”<sup>38</sup> In a 1928 letter to Langston Hughes, Hurston voiced her concern about stage misrepresentations: “It makes me sick to see how these cheap white folks are grabbing our stuff and ruining it. . . . [M]y one consolation being that they never do it right and so there is still a chance for us.”<sup>39</sup> She complained to her patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, that whites continually misconstrued black culture, attributing the failure of the 1932 play *Fast and Furious* because “the man at the head of things [Forbes Randolph] was stupid and trite and squeezed all Negro-ness out of every thing and substituted what he thought *ought* [double underlined] to be Negro humor.”<sup>40</sup> Distressed by such misconceptions, she wrote “Characteristics of Negro Expression” to set the record straight.

The essay begins with the observation that “the Negro’s universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama” (CNE 24). For Hurston, black performance and identity were forged in the nexus of mimicry. She viewed mimicry as a necessary criterion of what was essentially performance because mimicry was the main way in which experience and tradition were passed from one generation to the next. In a culture barred from language, education, heritage, and self-conceptualizations of identity—and denied access to history, literature, and textual (written) communication—mimicry became one of the few mechanisms of enacting social continuity, educating the young, preserving cultural memory, and experiencing one’s identity. She stressed mimetic experience because it provided an epistemological way of understanding life. Art for her was not a static object, but becomes the experience that actually transforms interpreter and audience. For Hurston, art is a living organism which evolves through the felt experience of everyday encounters and theatre serves as a definitive conduit for the transmission of folk culture.

The idea of “experience” as the litmus test for identity has endured opprobrium from poststructuralists who argue that experience relies on empiricism (raw data) without interrogating how it is produced. Experience becomes an un-problematized given that presents binary differences (black/white, man/woman, gay/straight, etc.) without acknowledging how linguistic practices describing such distinctions are complicit in perpetuating the status quo. Hazel Carby observes that the “representation of ‘the folk’ is usually regarded as an

ahistorical literary convention that is a natural expression of the Afro-American experience. But we need to recognize that the ‘folk’ was neither an inevitable nor a natural selection.”<sup>41</sup> The concept of the “folk” can evoke stereotyping, at times suggesting communal, homogenous, a-historic collectives dancing and singing in one uncontested voice that smacks of lowbrow populism and nostalgia for pre-modern, pre-commercial, and anti-bourgeois art. While it is important in discussing folk experience to proceed with caution, I concur with Eddie S. Glaude, who defends “experience” as “politically robust” because experience, rightly understood, “signals a conception of agency profoundly implicated in the vicissitudes of life.” Building on Deweyian Pragmatism, Glaude posits an intelligently guided action in everyday experience “that reflects our efforts to modify our conditions of living within the context of a particular problem.”<sup>42</sup> This, I maintain, is Hurston’s intention, too: to present experience as events among people confronting problems, seeking solutions, and working within a spatial and historical context.<sup>43</sup> This is not to suggest that Hurston was completely free of propagating her own brand of essentialism; her essay is rife with suggestive stereotypes. Rather, I want to stress that for Hurston mimetic performance is more than mere entertainment; it is an event transmitting cultural heritage and preserved social cohesion in the face of racism that sought to nullify black roots. Hurston’s concept of mimetic performance ought, therefore, to be regarded as a political as well as an aesthetic notion because mimetic experience is a fundamental survival tactic from the Middle Passage, through slavery, and into the present.

Hurston provides an example of experience through her description of her rehearsal technique. In an interview with folklorist Alan Lomax she explains the way in which she learns folk music:

I just get in a crowd with the people and if they’re singing I listen as best I can and I start to joining in with a phrase or two. And then, finally, I get so I can sing a verse. And then I keep on until I learn all the songs, all the verses, and then I sing them back to the people until they tell me that I can sing them just like them. And then I take part, and I try it out on different people who already know the song until they are quite satisfied that I know it. And then I carry it in my memory.<sup>44</sup>

Hurston’s description is indicative of the value of experience as both a theatrical-rehearsal technique and an epistemological tool. Immersion, trial-and-error, and primarily embodiment are transmitted viscerally and kinesthetically. The song is carried through her memory because experience and memory had been the central and often only means of cultural transmission available to African Americans.<sup>45</sup> Mimicry and memory are therefore inextricably linked to an internal societal function that repeats albeit with modification.

Hurston's accentuation of the internal function of black cultural experience clashed with the efforts of what Henry Louis Gates calls "the Victorian deans of the Renaissance" who wanted to "'elevate the race' in the eyes of an incredulous white world; internal function could only be secondary."<sup>46</sup> M. Genevieve West sums it up best when she says (and interestingly uses the phrase "horizon of expectations") that "the horizon of expectations for her contemporaries permitted racist readers to align [Hurston's] characters with negative stereotypes."<sup>47</sup> Those who advocated "expectations" sought to distance themselves from Hurston's nitty-gritty experiential prose. Locke, for example, found that Hurston's skills "keep her flashing on the surface of her community and her characters and from diving down deep either to the inner psychology of characterization or to sharp analysis of the social background."<sup>48</sup> Although Locke was wrong—Hurston did convey depth—her methods differed from his.<sup>49</sup> Hurston elevated the "will to adorn" as the second most important component of African American performance because adornment was the expressive antithesis of mainstream conformity and a core feature of black expression. Adornment is a performative act, an excessive display and affirmation of cultural distinction. This stands in contrast to the literary style characterized by Georgia Douglas Johnson, where minimalism and expectations were the objectives.

## Horizons of Expectation

Johnson's plays focus on black people immersed in the vortex of history. Harlem Renaissance dramatists, James Hatch and Ted Shine note, examines history in order "to liberate the black audience from an oppressive past, to present a history that provides continuity, hope, and glory. Such feelings and knowledge have positive survival value for the race."<sup>50</sup> Like the patrons of her salon May Miller, Willis Richardson, Mary Burrill, and Angelina Weld Grimké, Johnson stresses a value system of drama meant as a corrective to mainstream theatre and a literary style emphasizing uplift and hope.

Johnson was strongly influenced by Alain Locke. Locke's concept of "folk" had little to do with Hurston's brand of ribald naturalism; his was an art form derived from the Irish and Yiddish stage seeking an elevated cultural expression. Folk for him was the antidote to primitivism: it was a neo-proletarian art challenging minstrel carnivalesque. The folk play, Locke maintained, is drama "of free self-expression and imaginative release," conveying "beautifully and colorfully the folk life of the race."<sup>51</sup> Johnson, however, veered subtly from her mentor on one particular point: her works emphasized not so much the "propaganda" stressed by Du Bois, but the progressive, self-help spirit of Booker T. Washington and the genteel movement of racial uplift. Her dramas are morality tales refracting racial prejudice and seeking to curtail pernicious stereotypes. Johnson's first play, a 1925 one-act titled *A Sunday Morning in the South*, depicts the family life of Sue Jones, a seventy-year old grandmother, preparing breakfast for her two grandchildren.<sup>52</sup> Tom Griggs, nineteen, enters late because

he worked late the night before. He is enterprising, dedicated to the hope of a bright future; his dialogue evokes the entrepreneurial rhetoric of Booker T. Washington. Everything onstage is meant to convey an ordinary Sunday morning brimming with future: Bossie, Tom's bright and feisty younger brother, joins them at the breakfast table; freshly prepared home cooking is served; and Sue's warm friend Liza appears rounding out the picture. Called a "protest play" by Johnson herself, *A Sunday Morning in the South* presents Tom Griggs falsely accused of attacking a white woman. According to Gloria T. Hull, "Despite his sterling reputation and statements from his good seventy-year-old grandmother [Sue Jones] and younger brother [Bossie], [Tom] is taken from the questionable custody of officers and lynched by a mob."<sup>53</sup> This synopsis is important but so is the setting Johnson creates: the Sunday morning Church bells, the breakfast, and the characters discussing expectations and possibilities brutally interrupted by the police and the accusing woman. For Johnson the world onstage is meant to be a haven destroyed by outside (offstage) forces. The stage conveys serenity and horizon of expectation violated by irrational violence. The point of the play was to show not only the brutality of lynching but also the interruption of expectations such horrendous acts produce.

Johnson's award winning 1927 one-act *Plumes* deals with funerals and expectations. Claudia Tate called *Plumes* "Johnson's most celebrated play" and in a 1951 letter to Johnson, Langston Hughes called *Plumes* "one of the best little plays I've ever seen."<sup>54</sup> *Plumes* takes place in "The Kitchen of a two-room cottage"<sup>55</sup> and owes much to John Millington Synge's one-act folk drama *Riders to the Sea*. The protagonist Charity Brown is faced with a crisis: her daughter is fatally ill. Charity must decide whether to pay for an expensive operation unlikely to succeed or use the money for a dignified and likewise expensive funeral. Doctor Scott arrives warning Charity that the operation is the last chance for survival; but Charity's friend, Tildy, brings talisman that suggest death is imminent. "Coffee grounds don't lie," Tildy says (82). Johnson's *Plumes* would be recognized by a black constituency conscious of folk beliefs in "coffee grounds" representing spells, voodoo, and *juju*—amulets with West African origins attributed to charm and magic. In the end Charity chooses to ignore the Doctor. In the final tableau she stands beneath a doorframe that, similar to *Riders to the Sea*, symbolizes a coffin. She, like the mother in *Riders*, reports the death of her child.

Johnson exposes ancient myths of the rural south and the working class's relationship to death. Many low-income people consider burial a matter of pride, seeking a dignified funeral for themselves and their relations. Despite its expense, many in the black working class place great emphasis on a pricy send-off. Johnson tapped into this longstanding tradition and deep feeling about last rites, funerals as homecomings, and suspicion of doctors. Such suspicions were hardly unwarranted; the Tuskegee medical experiment, for example, was merely one of many instances of disreputable actions. In light of this mistrust, during slavery and into the reconstruction era many women created mutual-aid societies to guarantee decent medical care and respectful burials. These horizons of expectation, like

folk songs and legends, were communicated within an underground culture. The kitchen space in *Plumes*, the relationship of Charity and Tildy, and the ritual rites of passage comprise the poetics of domesticity and hope. While Johnson's plays were undoubtedly informed by experience, they stressed expectations of justice and the emphasis on self-help.

Though they did receive productions, Johnson's dramas were more often read than performed. They circulated in her salon and discussed amongst the participants. In many respects her salon followed the long tradition of the black Church, which functioned, in the words of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "as a discursive, critical arena—a public sphere in which values and issues were aired, debated, and disseminated throughout the larger black community."<sup>56</sup> Arnold Rampersad notes that the *Crisis* and its contemporary magazines "had limited success in influencing the national conscience. . . . But as chronicles of one of the most difficult ages in black American history and vehicles for the necessarily confused expression of creative artists of the time, they performed an indispensable function."<sup>57</sup> I suggest that Harlem Renaissance salons, and the ideas emanating from them that transpired in theatre and drama, also performed an indispensable function. The creative ideas emerging from the salons set the stage for artists like Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson, and others whose works combine the space of experience and the horizon of expectation. Many of the Harlem Renaissance plays and theatrical productions seem basic and rudimentary in comparison to the sophistication of Hansberry, Wilson, Adrienne Kennedy, Lloyd Richards, George C. Wolfe and other notable contemporary theatre artists. I am not suggesting that the Harlem Renaissance dramatists and theatre artists were equivalent (though I hasten to note that Charles Gilpin was a great actor of any generation). The theatre people of the Harlem Renaissance were pathfinders, gifted artists who probed questions about race and drama amidst a period replete with obstacles. Moreover, the representatives of experience and expectation intersected literally as well as figuratively. The playwright and director Owen Dodson reported that Georgia Douglas Johnson "took in stray people, artists who were out of money like Zora Neale Hurston for long periods."<sup>58</sup> The image of these two great artists under one roof for long periods gives credence to the belief that salons—a space of conversation and a venue for exchanging ideas—greatly influenced the formation of African American drama.

We therefore cannot underestimate the importance of salons to African American artists. Cut off from mainstream venues, black artists sought refuge among fellow artists for feedback, criticism, and support. Art is rarely created in a vacuum, and black art was no exception. With limited public recognition, creativity goes undernourished. Walker, Johnson, and Aaron Douglas used their homes and influence to establish forums for discussion, evaluation, and development of creativity. This essay pays particular attention to Johnson and Walker's salons, but we ought not to forget Aaron Douglas's importance in creating venues for artists, too. While Douglas's artistic work was non-literary, he provided a place (his Harlem home) for the input and output of ideas and issues germane to

dramatists like Johnson and Hurston (and many others such as Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Angelina Weld Grimké, May Miller, and Willis Richardson). Through their unselfish devotion to art, Walker, Johnson, and Douglas provided inspiring spaces for themes and ideas that made the Harlem Renaissance one of the great eras of aesthetic achievement and laid the groundwork for things to come.

## Notes

1. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Thomas Burger, trans. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 41.
2. George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 126, 127. See also Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Maberry Johnson, *Propaganda & Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of African-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991).
3. Gwendolyn B. Bennett, "The Ebony Flute," *Opportunity* 5 (July 1927): 212; see also Bennett's remarks in *Opportunity* 4 (October 1926): 322, and *Opportunity* 4 (November 1926): 356-58.
4. Quoted in Judith L. Stephens, *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson: From the New Negro Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 17.
5. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940; New York: Hill & Wang, 1967), 216.
6. An unpublished list of attendees can be located in the Georgia Douglas Johnson Papers, Box 162-1, folder 4, and Box 162-2, folder 17, at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Library at Howard University. The names include Jean Toomer, Jessie Fauset, Wallace Thurman, William Stanley Braithwaite, Charles S. Johnson, Arna Bontemps, Kelly Miller, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, May Burrill, Chandler Owen, Lewis Alexander, Marita Bonner, Owen Dodson, Mollie Gibson Brewer, Grant Lucas, Angelina Weld Grimké, Effie Lee Newsome, Richard Bruce Nugent, Montgomery Gregory, Rebecca West, Ann Spencer, Wright Cuney, E. C. Williams, B. K. Bruce, Glen Carrington, Mae Miller, Adella Parks, Frank Horne, and Mae Howard Jackson, in addition to those mentioned above. See also interview of Willis Richardson, "Recorded Interview by Larry Garvin," July 1974, Hatch-Billops Collection, New York, NY, for Richardson's comment on the late night sessions at Johnson's home.
7. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 245.
8. Richard Bruce Nugent, "On the Dark Tower," Writer's Program of New York, for the WPA, Microfiche ScMicro R 6544 (Reel 1), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, undated (essay can be found at the end of the reel).
9. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 172.
10. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk, Writings* (1903; New York: Library of America, 1986), 544.
11. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, tr. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 260. The original German title is *Vergangene Zukunft* (1979).
12. Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," *World Tomorrow* (May 1928): 215-16.
13. Hurston, "Folklore," unpublished essay, Special Collections, University of South Florida, from Florida's Federal Writers Project, Negro Unit, n. d. Hurston often repeats the metaphor "boiled down juice of human living" to describe folklore. For instance, she writes that folklore is "the boiled down juice of human living. It does not belong to any special time, place, nor people." Written for the Federal Writers' Project and quoted in *Go Gator and Muddy Water: Writings by Zora Neale Hurston from the Federal Writers' Project*, Pamela Bordelon, ed. (New York: Norton, 1999), 69.
14. Hurston, quoted in *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley: Turtle Island Press, 1981), 83.
15. Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," *Negro: An Anthology*, Nancy Cunard, ed. (London: Frederick Unger, 1934); reprinted (New York: Negro University Press, 1969), 39-46; reprinted (abridged) Hugh Ford, ed. (New York: Continuum, 1996), 24-31. References here will use the 1996 edition as *CNÉ* and page number in the text.
16. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 258, 259, 260-1.
17. *Ibid.*, 259.
18. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (1892; Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 196.
19. Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 297.
20. In 1926 Langston Hughes argued that whiteness is a "mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America," while George Schuyler asserted that any essential black art apart from

- the mainstream is “hokum;” or, W.E.B. Du Bois claiming that “all Art is Propaganda,” while Alain Locke suggesting that propaganda yielded “melodramatic sentimentalism” at the expense of “pure expression . . . of folk forms and traditions.” Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” *The Nation*, 23 June 1926, 692; George S. Schuyler “The Negro-Art Hokum,” *The Nation* (16 June 1926), 662; W.E.B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” *Crisis* 32 (January 1926), 296; Alain Locke, “The Negro’s Contribution to American Art and Literature,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Politics and Social Science* 140 (November 1928), 241. For an excellent analysis of the Du Bois-Locke debate (propaganda versus folk), see Samuel Hay, *African American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
21. James Weldon Johnson, “Preface,” *The Book of Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922), xl.
  22. Angelina Weld Grimké, “‘Rachel’ The Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis by the Author,” *Competitor* 1 (1920), 52.
  23. Johnson’s salon was where Richard Bruce Nugent first met Langston Hughes. It was there that they discussed ideas leading to the publication of *Fire!!*. See Nugent, video recorded interview with Jean Blackwell Hutson, April 14, 1982, located at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, Thomas H. Wirth, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 5.
  24. Locke, *A Decade of Negro Self Expression*, Locke, ed. (Charlottesville, VA: Michie Co., 1928), 5.
  25. David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 95.
  26. Aaron Douglas, handwritten “open letter” on *Fire!!* Stationary, No. 88-52, Box 1, Folder 9, Douglas Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
  27. In Mary White Ovington’s review of *The New Negro*, she writes “What, then, is the New Negro? Read and see. You will find, perhaps to your disappointment, very like his white neighbors.” Ovington, “The Negro’s Gifts,” *The Bookman* LXIII (March 1926): 98.
  28. Arthur Huff Fauset, “Intelligentsia,” *Fire!!* 1, Wallace Thurman, ed. (1926): 45.
  29. Du Bois, “Negro Renaissance into Decadence,” *Crisis* 31 (June 1926): 141; Locke, “*Fire!!: A Negro Magazine*,” *Survey* 58 (Aug. 15-Sept. 15, 1927), 563; Locke, “Black Truth and Black Beauty,” *Opportunity* 11 (January 1933): 16.
  30. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 237.
  31. For studies on the publication history of *The Negro: An Anthology*, see Jane Marcus, “Bonding and Bondage: Nancy Cunard and the Making of the Negro Anthology,” *Borders, Boundaries, and Frames: Cultural Criticism and Cultural Studies*, Mae Henderson, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 33-63, and Tory Young, “The Reception of Nancy Cunard’s Negro Anthology,” *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*, Maroula Joannou, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 113-122.
  32. Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 254; Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 162. In chronicling these performative experiences, Hurston drew from her anthropological study of folklore from 1927 to 1930 in Florida, Alabama, and Louisiana, as well as the hoodoo rituals in New Orleans and Caribbean dance in Nassau, Bahamas.
  33. Lynda Marion Hill, *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1996), 32.
  34. Hurston, “Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas,” *Journal of American Folklore* 43 (July 1930): 294-312; and “Hoodoo in America,” *Journal of American Folklore* 44 (October-December 1931): 318-417.
  35. Rafia Zafar, “Southern Daughter, Native Son: Hurston and Wright,” *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Sacvan Bercovitch, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 341.
  36. Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” 215-16.
  37. Hurston, “You Don’t Know Us Negroes,” Lawrence E. Spivak file, Box 37, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, pg. 2. The essay, in galley form, was evidently cut from the magazine.
  38. Hurston, “You Don’t Know Us Negroes,” 5. The southern vernacular and folk idioms that Hurston had assembled in the course of her research were, according to Anthea Kraut, not only appropriate for the theatre but also provided “a corrective to contemporaneous presentations of African American culture.” Hurston was determined to reveal “her own nuanced theory of black vernacular expression” diametrically opposed to the status quo. See Kraut, “Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham,” *Theatre Journal* 55 (Oct. 2003): 440.
  39. Hurston, “Letter to Langston Hughes,” 20 September 1928, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, Carla Kaplan, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 126.
  40. Hurston, “Letter to Charlotte Osgood Mason,” 25 Sept. 1934, *Life in Letters*, 226. The play *Fast and Furious* opened on August 27, 1931, in Jackson Heights, Queens, and moved to Broadway’s New Yorker Theatre on September 15 of that year. For details, see Playbills of *Fast and Furious*, at

the Manuscript, Archive, and Rare Books Division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

41. Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 165.

42. Eddie S. Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 96.

43. Michael North raises the vigorous point that Hurston was working through the dichotomy of cultural relativism on the one hand and the “vigor and enthusiasm” of black cultural aesthetics on the other. “Hurston’s dilemma,” North writes, “was not so much to resolve the contradiction between these two choices as to figure out why they were so often the only choices available.” *The Dialectics of Modernism: Race, Language & Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 179. It might well be that Hurston’s pragmatism was a way of working through the choices and accepting the cash value of the ideas that worked.

44. Hurston, recorded at the Library of Congress by Alan Lomax, quoted from the CD accompanying *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, general eds., Robert G. O’Meally, audio ed. (New York: Norton, 1997).

45. Among many fine studies of memory, see Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), and Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich, *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

46. Henry Louis Gates, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 184. Gates quotes the term “elevate the race” from Ernest Boyd, “The New Negro,” *The Independent* (December 1925): 8-11.

47. M. Genevieve West, *Zora Neale Hurston & American Literary Culture* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005), 54.

48. Locke, “Jingo, Counter-Jingo, and Us,” *Opportunity* 16 (Jan. 1938): 10. In a letter to James Weldon Johnson (Feb. 1938), Hurston responded by calling Locke “malicious,” adding: “God help you if you get on without letting him ‘represent’ you!” *Life in Letters*, 413. See also Hurston’s “The Chick with One Hen,” a response to Locke submitted to *Opportunity* but denied publication, in which she derided Locke’s review as “rank dishonesty” and “conscious fraud.” Zora Neale Hurston Collection, James Weldon Johnson Papers, MSS 9, Box 1, folder 8a, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

49. For an examination of the complex ways Hurston negotiated the temporal and spatial realities of the South and the North, see Leigh Anne Duck, “‘Go there tuh know there’: Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotope of the Folk,” *American Literary History* 13.2 (2001): 265-294.

50. James V. Hatch and Ted Shine, *Black Theatre U. S. A.: Forty-Five Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974* (New York: The Free Press, 1974), 351.

51. Locke, “The Drama of Negro Life,” *Theatre Arts Monthly* 10 (October 1926): 704. Jeffery Stewart reminds us of their close bond in his essay, “Alain Locke and Georgia Douglas Johnson, Washington Patrons of Afro-American Modernism,” *George Washington University Washington Studies* 12 (1986): 37-44. Stewart writes that “If Johnson helped Alain Locke cope with the death of his mother, Locke was the critic who provided the sympathetic counsel, pre-publication revisions, an inspired forewords that helped establish Georgia Douglas Johnson as one of the bright lights on the Renaissance horizon” (37). See also David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 131-64, for a discussion of Locke’s influence on Johnson.

52. Two versions of the play, plus four reviews, are located in George Mason University’s Special Collection and Archive.

53. Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 171. Other representative essays on Johnson are Winona L. Fletcher, “From Gentle Poet to Revolutionary Playwright: Georgia Douglas Johnson,” *Theatre Annual* 40 (1985): 41-64; Megan Sullivan, “Folk Plays, Home Girls and Back Talk: Georgia Douglas Johnson and Women of the Harlem Renaissance,” *CLA Journal* 38 (June 1995): 404-19; Jeanne-Marie A. Miller, “Georgia Douglas Johnson and May Miller: Forgotten Playwrights of the New Negro Renaissance,” *CLA Journal* 33 (June 1990): 349-366; and three essays by Judith L. Stephens, “The Anti-Lynching Play: Toward an Interracial Feminist Dialogue in Theatre,” *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 2 (Fall 1990): 59-69; “Anti-Lynch Plays by African American Women: Race, Gender, and Social Protest in American Drama,” *African American Review* 26.2 (1992): 329-339; and “Politics and Aesthetics, Race and Gender: Georgia Douglas Johnson’s Lynching Dramas as Black Feminist Cultural Performance,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20 (July 2000): 251-267. Stephens and Kathy A. Perkins have chronicled Johnson’s work in numerous anthologies.

54. Claudia Tate, “Introduction,” *The Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, Tate, ed. (New York: G. K. Hall, 1997), lx; Hughes to Johnson, 6 July 1951, Langston Hughes Correspondence, Box 83, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Library.

55. *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, Judith L. Stephens, ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 74. Future references will be listed in the text.

56. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 7.
57. Arnold Rampersad, *The Art & Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 201.
58. Owen Dodson, quoted in *Black Theatre USA*, Vol. 1 (revised edition), Hatch and Shine, ed. (New York: Free Press, 1996), 232.