Histories of the Counter-Future: Theodore Ward, Alice Childress, and the Manifestos of the People's Theatre

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Histories of the Counter-Future

Theodore Ward, Alice Childress, and the Manifestos of the People's Theatre

—JULIE BURRELL

On the heels of the Federal Theatre Project's dissolution in 1939, Black theatre artists debated about and dreamed of new institutions and movements that would insist on, and even perhaps bring about, Black freedom. Proponents of Negro people's theatre planned a movement based in artistic self-determination, by Black theatre artists and for Black people, while embracing the interracial spirit of the Popular Front. The Negro people's theatre would expand to fit many forms and manifestations across the 1930s–1940s: it could be explicitly left-wing and stage-stirring protest dramas; it could be experimental and expressionist, drawing from trends in European and Soviet theatre; it could be commercially minded, as interested in social farces skewering Striver's Row elites as in social causes.

The capacious concept of a people's theatre found articulation in manifestos written by two of the most influential playwrights of the long Civil Rights Movement, Theodore Ward and Alice Childress. They shared a common interest in theatre by and for the proletariat, and they envisioned this theatre as an international arts movement and a cultural front "in the struggle for a better world."[1] Ward's 1940 speech, "Our Conception of the Theatre and Its Function," and Childress's 1951 article, "For a Negro Theatre," are separately created but mutually reinforcing manifestos that bookend the tumultuous decade of the 1940s. In them, Ward and Childress both celebrate the historical phenomenon known as the Negro people's theatre and performatively bring it into being.

In what follows, I consider Ward's and Childress's manifestos as paradigmatic

models of the genre during the Civil Rights–Cold War period, while exploring their significance for Black theatre, and Black theatre manifestos, across the twentieth century. These manifestos draw on the strengths of the genre as performative to both index Black theatre history and enact it, in essence creating the very idea of the people's theatre that they claim has historically existed. Moreover, in their suppositions about the future, "Our Conception of the Theatre and Its Function" and "For a Negro Theatre" challenge any distinction between political and artistic manifestos through speculative means, all while unsettling categories that isolate Black manifestos from high modernist examples of the genre. Ward and Childress not only anticipate the Black Arts Movement but also map possible futures for Black theatre, or, indeed, map futures brought about through Black theatre.

Ward's "Our Conception of the Theatre and Its Function" was delivered as a speech in front of thousands on September 23, 1940, at Harlem's Golden Gate Ballroom.[2] The event publicly inaugurated the newly formed Negro Playwrights Company (NPC) founded by Ward (who was also the NPC's general manager), Theodore Browne, Owen Dodson, Langston Hughes, Powell Lindsay, and George Norford. Associate members included a roster of Harlem artists and activists, such as Gwendolyn Bennett, Alain Locke, Paul Robeson, and Ward's friend from the Chicago South Side Writers Group, Richard Wright.[3] Like Robeson and Wright, Ward was a key member of what Brian Dolinar, building on Michael Denning, names the Black cultural front: affiliated cultural workers and activists on the left who opposed racism and fascism.[4] Like many cultural front texts, Ward's manifesto calls for a broad-based cultural program—a "magnificent movement which is today seeking throughout the land to make the play the thing for the people"—that would speak to and for the proletariat. "Today," Ward declaimed, "the problem is to restore [theatre] to its legitimate heirs, for there can be no doubt but that it is the heritage of the many. This is the core of the meaning of the term people's theatre. It is the crux of the idea of the Negro Playwrights Company."[5] For Ward, a true people's theatre is revolutionary, meaning both a socialist upheaval and a return to a lost tradition; it breaks from both the bourgeois theatre that had been "sequestered into the exclusive property of the few" and the light entertainment fed to the masses, and it restores theatre to an unspecified "early society," when "there was no boundary between the arts" or between theatre and people's daily lives and necessities.[6]

In his speech, Ward both addresses and creates a "people" for whom his theatre exists and from whom his theatre springs. As Janet Lyon argues, "the manifesto addresses and at the same time elicits an entity called the People"; moreover, it "accorded them a discursive voice that drew its power from the force of

'the many' for which it claimed to speak."[7] The idea of a theatre that would speak to and for the Negro people was perhaps the most important and lasting cultural benchmark for Black theatre artists from the 1930s to the 1950s. The NPC was one of many theatre groups and artists who espoused the model. As Melissa Barton explains, "The Negro People's Theatres adopted the phrase 'people's theatre' from a growing trend in Depression-era national theatre culture." The trend began in the 1930s, when organizations such as The New Theatre League of New York moved away from a strictly worker's theatre to encompass "a grassroots, community-driven alternative to the 'legitimate' commercial theatre."[8] Interracial in theory and often Black nationalist in spirit, the Negro people's theatre was an influential concept, but it was by no means a fixed one, demanding that it be reimagined and continually promulgated to reaffirm its centrality—in short, a theory best articulated in the manifesto.

For Ward, the ideal form of the people's theatre was a type of serious realism dealing with "the life of the ordinary citizen." His people's theatre departs from the idea that theatre was "designed to give light amusement," which he sees as a "falsehood . . . concocted by those who are contemptuous of the intelligence of the common man." That is, Ward's people's theatre happened to mean precisely the type of theatre he was so adept at scripting. Accordingly, the first, and last, production of the NPC was Ward's *Big White Fog* in 1940, which played at a former vaudeville house, the Lincoln Theatre, on 135th Street and Lenox Avenue.[9]

On the other side of the decade, Alice Childress's 1951 manifesto, "For a Negro Theatre" is grounded in but also breaks from the Negro people's theatre that precedes it. Published in the Marxist cultural organ, *Masses & Mainstream*, as well as *The Daily Worker*, "For a Negro Theatre" begins by crediting Ward as inspiration, after the two sometimes-friends, sometimes-rivals engaged in "a heated though friendly discussion concerning a Negro theatre." Initially insisting that such a theatre "might be a Jim Crow institution," Childress maintains she has come around to Ward's point.[10] I suspect that Childress appeals to Ward at the outset of her manifesto, not only because Ward was on the editorial board at *Masses & Mainstream*, but also, cannily, to position herself as the imminent future of black playwriting, especially since she was currently shifting her focus from performing to writing, with *Florence* and *Just a Little Simple* both recently produced.[11] While the two playwrights' manifestos share a focus on ordinary people, Childress goes slightly further by mapping out a programmatic, institutional framework and articulating a performance theory that envisions the people not only as audiences but as creators in their own right.

Neither Ward nor Childress named these documents manifestos. They notably lack the forcefulness of tone, what Lyon calls the manifesto's "staging of

fervid, even violent rage," characteristic of Black theatre manifestos like Amiri Baraka's "The Revolutionary Theatre" or Black political manifestos like David Walker's *Appeal*.[12] Neither Ward nor Childress attempt the formal and typographical impudence of high modernist art manifestos (or, again, Walker's *Appeal*). Yet they share what Laura Winkiel calls manifestos' "quintessential gesture of modernity: they proclaim themselves the arbiters of the new and the 'now' and reject the past."[13] So why call them manifestos? Taking Laura Cull and Will Daddario's point that retroactively naming things manifestos can evacuate the genre's meaning ("everything is a manifesto so nothing is"), I also appreciate their insistence that "the situated gesture of retroactively claiming a work as 'manifesto' . . . constitutes a kind of manifesto in itself: an insistence that we (re-)read, (re-) encounter that work less as representation and more as production, less in terms of informational content and more with an attention to its performative affect."[14]

One outcome of claiming Ward's and Childress's documents as manifestos is to address the oversight of many major studies of the genre that disregard contributions by those outside of Europe and/or those crafted by artists of color. This omission often stems from the art manifesto's accepted periodization in high modernism, which is still often spatialized as originating from European metropoles. Even when grounded in the example of *The Communist Manifesto*, as Martin Puchner's is, such studies tend to disregard that the most radical Marxist and avant-garde provocations, including manifestos, often come from the diaspora (e.g., the work of Suzanne and Aimé Césaire).[15] Manifesto studies have also left unproblematized the high moderns' tendency to romanticize a "primitive" Africa and/or Asia. This genealogy of the manifesto has remained largely canonical until quite recently, despite the many intervening years since works such as Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) served to reshape the studies of modernity and modernism.[16]

This special section of *Theatre History Studies* asks that we consider the centrality of the manifesto genre to Black theatre history, which necessarily demands a reassessment of our historiographical methods. In *Poetry of the Revolution*, Puchner argues that the manifesto's generic mandate is "the act of declaring a new departure, of setting one ism against the next, and of laying claim to the future at the expense of the past." This "revolutionary historiography" is a function of the genre, an effect produced *by* the manifesto rather than a history reflected *in* the manifesto: "The manifesto's historiography left its marks on many studies of the avant-garde, which often repeat the history of succession and ruptures fabricated by manifestos: symbolism broke with naturalism; vorticism, with futurism; dadaism, with futurism; surrealism, with dadaism; situationism, with surrealism; and so on ad infinitum. The avant-garde history of succession and

rupture seems inevitable in hindsight, but it must be recognized as a specific effect of the manifesto. . . . [We] must stop taking the manifesto at face value and instead analyze its formation."[17] Bearing in mind the generic effects of the manifesto, the way it appears to produce history, what do Ward's and Childress's manifestos tell us about the critical concept of the Negro people's theatre or about Black theatre manifestos more generally? Attention to the manifesto genre reveals the people's theatre not as an unchanging spatiotemporal era or fixed form but, rather, as a site of contestations, hopes, anxieties, and desires over what Black theatre was, is, and could be. More generally, one of Black theatre manifestos' "performative affects/effects" is to intervene into historical narratives that create the effect of an inexorable flow of progressive time while positioning Black and colonized people as existing only ever in the past or outside of time.[18] Rather, as Winkiel argues about C. L. R. James's work on the Haitian revolution, Black manifestos produce a "fold in time," to "project a modernity that *might have been* and perhaps *will be* possible in the future."[19]

The Manifesto and Black Theatre History

Like Ward, Childress begins her manifesto with an invocation of ancient theatre: "The word theatre is derived from the Greek, meaning to see or to view. One obvious function of a Negro people's theatre is to give us the opportunity of seeing and viewing the Negro people"—that is, to make manifest, with both theatre and the manifesto sharing this function.[20] The manifesto is an art animated (or haunted, depending on whom you ask) by theatre, and vice versa.[21] In his introduction to *Theatre Journal*'s 2005 special issue on Black Performance, Harry Elam suggests the persistent historical imbrication of Black theatre with the manifesto: "'What is a black play and/or what is playing black?' These are, in fact, old questions of historical import and past weight. These questions go way back . . . before the debates waged by W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke on what should be the purposes and composition of a Negro Theatre." Despite references to Du Bois's and Locke's contributions to the genre, Elam never mentions the word manifesto, yet the concepts that he identifies as central to Black theatre are also fundamental to its manifestos: "At issue, then and now, in all these discussions is what should constitute the relationship between black play and black politics, between black play and white play, between black play and the social and cultural lives of black people in America."[22] Though these debates are staged in the manifesto, the genre has not gotten as much attention as it deserves in pre-Black Arts Movement Black theatre history.

Further, the manifesto is not, or not merely, a document reflective of history but an "act of *poesis* and creation" that creates the effect of history.[23] Returning to Lyon's formulation that "the manifesto addresses and at the same time elicits an entity called the People," Ward and Childress invent a "Negro people's theatre" as much as invoke an already existing form. When Ward gave his speech to the thousands assembled in Harlem in late September 1940, a Negro people's theatre *did* already exist, in a fashion. As Kate Dossett documents, a group called the Negro People's Theatre was founded by Dick Campbell and Rose McClendon, who mounted the first black production of *Waiting for Lefty* in 1935.[24] Likewise, we might consider the Negro Units of the Federal Theatre Project formations of Negro people's theatre. But in 1940, after the FTP was forced to close due to the Dies Committee's Red Scare, it was critical for Ward's manifesto to assure the authority and endurance of the Negro people's theatre.

Ward also takes the opportunity to redefine that theatre in his own terms, in effect creating the people's theatre anew. Like most manifestos, Ward's sweeps away the past to clear room for his vision of the future and yet calls on the past to underwrite his authority: "Historians tell us that in the early society the theatre was undifferentiated: that is, there was no boundary between the arts. The dance was a group festival to harness man's emotions and efforts in a socially progressive way . . . the dance was a collective ritual descriptive of the real processes of securing a livelihood. Just as the work songs and songs of protest of our own people demonstrate the relation between man's way-of-life—his work—and art, so did these early dances; for in them, it is said, the dancers strove to persuade others, with rhythmic movement to do, to plan, to hunt—their art thus arising out of the economic needs of the tribe." At the same time that he evokes this ancient people's theatre, Ward posits a Marxist base/superstructure model of culture that confirms his very contemporary place in the Black radical tradition.[25] The historical theory that he begins to articulate here culminates in *Our Lan'* (1947), his epic drama of Reconstruction. Drawing on Marxist historiography, including Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America*, *Our Lan'* perceives in the past actionable templates of Black radical experiments in socialist worldmaking that would usher in the "better world" Ward posits in his manifesto.

Even while the manifesto is not history per se, it offers important insights into questions that deeply troubled Black theatre artists in the past. These include frustrating economic and institutional limitations; battles against stereotypes and other hegemonic forms of representation; how limiting it could be to create within white-dominated theatre; and, at times, a purported lack of community interest in serious theatre, among others. Perhaps no twentieth-century manifesto articulates the institutional expressions of racism in white American

theatre as forcefully as August Wilson's "The Ground on Which I Stand" (1996), which indicts regional theatre's racist economic structures: "We need theatres to develop our playwrights. We need those misguided financial resources to be put to better use. Without theatres we cannot develop our talents. If we cannot develop our talents, then everyone suffers: our writers, the theatre, the audience."[26] Wilson, however, neglects the activist history of Black women who initiated the fight against institutional racism in the theatre before the 1960s. Childress's "For a Negro Theatre" is instructive in that regard.

Anticipating Wilson's argument that "Black theatre doesn't share in the economics that would allow it to support its artists," Childress outlines the structural limitations she faces as a performer, playwright, producer, and director: "Today in America the Negro actor attends drama schools, which, like the public schools, take little interest in the cultural or historical background of the Negro people. The Negro actors, scenic designers, playwrights, director, are taught only the techniques developed by the white artist. We certainly need and feel an appreciation for this technique. But certainly too there should be additional instruction which would advance the white as well as the Negro actor and playwright in his knowledge of the Negro people's culture. What Negro director or actor today is capable of portraying an African on the stage? Most of us can only 'suggest' an African because we have been divorced through education from much of our cultural heritage."[27] Considering Childress's very recent, very close ties to the American Negro Theatre (ANT), which had its own School of Drama, when this was published in 1951, her manifesto is an implicit criticism of what she perceived to be the ANT's limitations when it came to building a Black nationalist theatre institution rooted in Harlem. But it also insists on carrying on the ANT's extraordinary legacy after its closure in 1949–1950, keeping alive the dream of a Harlem community theatre.[28]

Childress's plan for theatre education is, moreover, rooted in everyday enactments of Blackness, with Black people as creators as well as performers worthy of study. The proletariat, for Childress, is not merely to be spoken to through theatre but studied because they embody Black experience. This is one of her central differences from Ward in their articulation of people's theatre. In the most expressive section of "For a Negro Theatre" Childress insists, "we . . . must turn our eyes toward our neighbors, the community, the domestic workers, porters, laborers, white-collar workers, churches, lodges and institutions." Her own fieldwork has yielded noteworthy observations. "I have learned that I must watch my people in railroad stations, in restaurants, in the fields and tenements, at the factory wheels, in the stores, on the subway," Childress writes. "My people walk in beauty, their feet singing along the pavement; my people walk as if their feet hurt,

in hand-me-down shoes." She continues, cataloguing: "My people stand weary with fatigue, half asleep, in the subway, my people have been scrubbing floors and washing walls and emptying, carrying, fetching, lifting, cooking, sweeping, shining, and polishing and ironing, washing, ironing, washing. . . . What could be a more fruitful study in the craft of acting than to reproduce one of these weary people?"[29] This is characteristic Childress in her sensitivity to the precise details of labor and her care for the mundane as well as beautiful aspects of Black life. It connects her to the anthropological and performance theory work that Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes captured in their own aesthetic manifestos, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" and "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," respectively.[30] It anticipates Barbara Ann Teer's insistence that "we dress a certain way, we paint a certain way, we make love a certain way. . . . All of these things we do in a different, unique, specific way that is personally ours," which can be heard in Beyoncé's "Alien Superstar," with its repeated, punctuated insistence on being "unique!"[31] Childress's Cold War, decolonization era manifesto also investigates experiential Blackness, which Frantz Fanon will take up, though quite differently, in *Black Skins, White Masks* in 1952.[32] Meanwhile, Childress subtly reminds her audience of what Black male leftists often left out of their political/artistic considerations—namely, Black women, including the domestic workers that Childress honored her entire career, who did the repetitive "ironing, washing, ironing, washing."[33]

Ward's and Childress's manifestos reveal ideological debates of their moment, but they also provide a much richer understanding of Black theatre by exploring the possible. While limning existing institutional, ideological, and economic restrictions that prevent Black theatre from thriving, Black theatre manifestos simultaneously project a liberatory future theatre. They participate in what Tavia Nyong'o calls "incompossibility," which describes how Black art "tethers together worlds that can and cannot be, and is thus a necessary step toward investigating possibilities outside our present terms of order."[34] Childress, for example, will insist on a visionary new educational arts infrastructure dedicated to teaching artists, and the world, about diasporic culture. "We should, in this second half of the century, plan to turn out the largest crop of Negro artists in the entire history of America. Our voices must be heard around the world."[35] Childress's blueprint of the "incompossible" marries concrete goals with an ambitious vision for Black theatre's role in the coming half century.

The Negro people's theatre manifestos exist in a tradition of incompossible blueprints for the Black theatre. These visionary plans crop up recurrently in Black theatre manifestos, and whether very specific and grounded or more abstract and theoretical, they dream of a community-based, liberatory Black

theatre. To name just a few: Du Bois's "Criteria of Negro Art"; the preamble to the constitution of the American Negro Theatre; Lorraine Hansberry's prospectus for the John Brown Memorial Theatre of Harlem; Amiri Baraka's "Communications Project" and John O'Neal's "Motion in the Ocean" in the 1968 Black Theatre issue of *TDR* (and, really, the whole issue); and many contributions to the Harry Elam–edited *Theatre Journal* volume dedicated to Black performance in 2005. Even if these theatres exist only in the imagination, even if short-lived, even if impeded by state repression in the guise of McCarthyism or COINTELPRO, they form a crucial part of Black theatre history. As Dossett reminds us, "African Americans' marginalization within the publishing and theatre industries means that any history focused on a 'finished' or end product reinscribes the racial hierarchies of the period in question."[36]

The Speculative Black Theatre Manifesto

The manifesto is, manifestly, a genre inseparable from the spatiotemporality of the present and future. This is most clear in the Black theatre movement of the 1960s–1970s, for which a keynote was the sweeping away of the old for the new. "The past," Larry Neal writes, "is really the enemy of the revolutionary."[37] This is persistently emblematized in BAM theatre through the trope of generational conflict. To return again to the Black Revolutionary Theatre issue of *TDR*, a "collective manifesto" for the Black theatre movement, plays like Sonia Sanchez's "The Bronx Is Next" thematize a generational struggle in which characters kill the older generation to clear the way for the Black nationalist revolution.[38] Sanchez's young revolutionaries think little of leaving Old Sister behind in her Harlem tenement, which they plan to burn down before doing the same in the Bronx, because she clings to the material relics of her past. Jimmy Garrett dramatizes this in "And We Own the Night," in which a reactionary mother is killed by her son. Marvin X's "Take Care of Business" and Dorothy Ahmad's "Papa's Daughter" both stage generational strain, if not murder, between parents and children, and so on.[39] The fundamental stance of the manifesto, clearing away the old to make room for the new, is the spirit that animates this issue of *TDR*. The utility of the genre is clear: the fundamentally futurist orientation of the manifesto offers successive generations of Black theatre artists a mode of articulating their speculative dreams of the future and rescripting the past for their own purposes.

Ward's and Childress's shared, speculative outlooks in part make their documents manifestos, even without the tonal brio or typographical experimentation

that we might expect from the genre. And, even while "Our Conceptions" and "For a Negro Theatre" are manifestos in and of themselves, they also envision a future theatre that will itself act as manifesto art. Ward in particular believes that people's theatre will instill in audiences a revolutionary consciousness, one that "embodies the tradition and spirit of Frederic Douglass [*sic*], of John Brown, Sojourner Truth, of Denmark Vesey, of Nat Turner, and of that mighty paragon of human greatness, Toussaint L'Ouverture!" Black theatre manifestos are themselves an act of performative creation as they act as theoretical foundations for future revolutionary art forms. This future theatre draws on the potency of the manifesto as "a genre that gives the appearance of being at once both word and deed, both threat and incipient action."[40] Again, Ward calls on the people's theatre to deliver a revolutionary temporality: "Surely there can be no drama more compelling, more vital, more exciting, more interesting, more all engrossing than that which manifests a coming to grips with life without evasion and affirms with candor the warm aspirations of a people who have come of age and demand their immediate freedom!" In a way, Ward conforms to an Enlightenment teleology in which Black people have finally "come of age," into modernity, but he also posits Black theatre as the ground on which a new, modern theatre will stand.

Ward's invocation of Black revolutionaries also brings to the fore questions about the art manifesto's entanglement with fascism. Ward and Childress position the Negro people's theatre on the vanguard opposed to global fascism(s), including the homegrown, white supremacist variety, what theatre artists of the time attacked as "native fascism."[41] Black theatre artists, then, trouble the avant-garde manifesto tradition, with its thorny complicity in the development of fascism, particularly since the Italian Futurists were the first art movement to self-consciously deploy manifestos in a systematic way. As Shadow Zimmerman explains, Italian Futurism and fascism were mutually constitutive, often binding themselves together through the medium of performance: "Benito Mussolini in particular harnessed the potency of the avant-garde by aligning himself with Filippo Marinetti and the Futurists, and he embraced the Futurist ideology, rhetoric, and definitions of citizenship accordingly."[42] Ward and Childress embrace the futurity of the manifesto, but not Futurism; instead, they specifically locate their imagined future as socialist, internationalist, and Black nationalist.[43]

However, the idea that the people's theatre is *merely* Communist propaganda is recognized as a reactionary tactic. Ward insists that any art created for the masses that goes beyond mere "amusement" is attacked as propaganda, a ploy he sees on a spectrum with Nazism ("the burnings, abroad, of books" and "the hounding of the Jewish people"). By the time Childress published

"For a Negro Theatre," the Cold War repressive apparatus was reaching a critical turning point; in 1950, the McCarran Internal Security Act was passed, and Paul Robeson's passport was revoked by the State Department. In this moment, "black writers and intellectuals were being intimidated, arrested, interrogated, indicted, jailed, deported, and blacklisted."[44] Childress warns that Civil Rights concessions from the United States are used as a tool in the Cold War: "We watch the newspapers to see if some foreign power is worrying the rulers of the United States into giving a few of our people a 'break' in order to offset the 'propaganda.'"[45] As has been extensively documented by Charlotte Canning, Michael Denning, Brian Dolinar, Gerald Horne, Bill Mullen, Penny Von Eschen, Alan Wald, and Mary Helen Washington, among others, the cultural front was a critical battleground for leftist Black artists navigating the Cold War. Even if they had a complex relationship to the CPUSA, both Ward and Childress speculate about a socialist future, in part brought about by revolutionary theatre that could thrive among the Black community, in a world in which repressive state technology and fascism no longer exist.

Of course, this future did not come to pass. Ward and Childress were both blacklisted, and their theatre careers were not revived until the 1960s–1970s. Ward's daughter, Laura Branca, recalls that after his being listed in *Red Channels*, her father "could not get a play produced," though he wrote constantly while working other jobs.[46] Childress's post-ANT venture, the Committee for the Negro in the Arts (I), attempted a visionary program to establish a Harlem community theatre but was forced to close in 1952, even padlocking the door to the nightclub they used as their performance space to avoid anti-Communist persecution.[47] Though the futures imagined by Ward's and Childress's manifestos were forestalled, they still warrant our attention as "a history of the futures [they] sought to predict, prefigure, and realize."[48] Black theatre manifestos have this in common with Afrofuturism. We can amend Puchner's formulation here by drawing on Kodwo Eshun's assertion that "Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures."[49] These manifestos serve as visionary programs of not just what Negro people's theatre was but what it could have been—the manifesto acting as a temporary suspension of normative temporality.

Speculative in political orientation, the manifestos of the Negro people's theatre were also formally experimental in ways that challenge distinctions between politics and aesthetics. Ward and Childress point to a radical aesthetic-political program that exceeds the aesthetic object (the "'finished' or end product") of a play and/or production.[50] Childress's *Gold Through the Trees*, for example, was both formally and politically innovative, not only for its aesthetics but for its

corresponding program of Black radical activism. Thanks to Mary Helen Washington's trailblazing archival work on Childress, we now know *Gold*'s, and Childress's, full radicalism: "Experimenting formally, Childress composed the lyrics and orchestrated the music and dance for the show, incorporating Ashanti dance, a Bantu love song, West Indian shouts and songs, drumming, and African American blues and gospel singing to accompany the play's historically based, politically left-wing dramatic sketches that trace the history of African peoples from ancient worlds to the 1950s."[51] After exploring ancient and modern Africa and US slavery and lynching, Childress sets the final scene in 1952 South Africa, featuring activists planning a "campaign of passive resistance" against Apartheid.[52] *Gold* not only represented anti-Apartheid protest but was staged in April 1952 to coordinate with the African National Congress's Defiance Campaign "to counter the 300-year anniversary of white settlement in the Cape region of South Africa."[53] Childress's formal experimentation in *Gold Through the Trees*, which connects Black people across the time and space of the diaspora, seamlessly blends into its offstage politics, which forges alliances between the US Civil Rights Movement and the South African Defiance Campaign.

In their refusal to separate aesthetics and activism, Ward's and Childress's manifestos both index the formal-political experimentation of the Negro people's theatre and prefigure the avant-garde of the Black Arts Movement. What Mike Sell argues about the BAM's "expansive politics of form" in terms of "the limits of an art-focused reading of the avant-garde" holds true for the Negro people's theatre, as well.[54] Artists of both movements understood that the theatrical or aesthetic object, whether play or performance, is an inadequate measure of the full range of Black theatre's experimental radicalism. Ward's and Childress's manifestos reveal ideological contestations around form, particularly about the limits of a strictly formal modernism for the utility of the Black freedom project. Like the BAM would do with the avant-garde tradition, Ward and Childress consciously reject *and* adopt elements of modernism.

In "Our Conceptions," for example, Ward approvingly cites Langston Hughes's speech to the anti-fascist conference, the International Association of Writers in Defense of Culture, which took place in Paris in 1939. Ward's quotation of Hughes reads: "There may still be those who prefer to use words to make people doubt and wonder, to remain inactive, unsure of the good in life, and afraid to struggle for it. But we who know better must use words to make people believe in life, to understand, and to attempt to make it better."[55] Hughes also insists, "Writers have power. . . . We know that words may be put together in many ways: in beautiful but weak ways having meaning only for the few, worldly-wise and capable of understanding; or in strong and sweeping ways, large and simple in form,

like yesterday's Walt Whitman or today's Theodore Dreiser."[56] Ward marshals Hughes's words seemingly both to disavow modernist formal difficulty and to embrace a tradition of democratic experimentalism that Hughes traces back to Whitman and through Dreiser. Ward also allies his own political-aesthetic attitude to that of Hughes. Hughes's radical, formal experimentations epitomized the "cultural intermixing" of Popular Front culture, its marriage of "highbrow and lowbrow (and even the dreaded 'middlebrow'), of pulp and high modernism, of folk culture and mass culture, of different genres, of different media."[57]

This cultural intermixing was evident on the night that Ward delivered his manifesto at the Golden Gate Ballroom. The inauguration of the Negro Playwrights Company was a sort of Popular Front variety show that married antiracist, anti-fascist politics with a range of cultural performance modes, according to coverage in *New Masses* by Alvah Bessie (the novelist who would be blacklisted as part of the Hollywood Ten). Performers included the jazz and classical pianist Hazel Scott, who, "on her way to Café Society, stopped by long enough to sing a song and swing Liszt's Second Hungarian Rhapsody." Richard Wright gave a talk about his recently published *Native Son*. Paul Robeson, "never in better voice," performed the songs "Water Boy" (the Black folk song) "Old Man River" (from the musical *Show Boat*), "Die Moorsoldaten" (a protest anthem of the Spanish Republicans, often translated as "The Peat-Bog Soldiers"), "the song of the new Russia, 'Fatherland'" (probably "Song of the Fatherland," composed by Isaak Dunaevsky), and "various spirituals." The NPC's introductory event was a multigenre performance experience, an experimental amalgam of Black folk, middlebrow, popular, and high culture, all underpinned by a commitment to Black freedom and internationalist anti-fascism. This experimental performance format would reach national preeminence during the Double V Campaign, often propagated through Negro Freedom Rallies that featured music (e.g., by Duke Ellington), dance (Pearl Primus), song (Paul Robeson), and plays like Hughes's pageant "For This We Fight," with performances by Canada Lee, Muriel Rahm, Hilda Simms, Gordon Heath, and Robert Earl Jones.[58]

In other words, for Ward and Childress, as for the Popular Front at large, their ethics and their aesthetic were one, to paraphrase Larry Neal's explanation of the Black Arts Movement.[59] I have been comparing Ward's and Childress's Popular Front manifestos, which have not traditionally been considered examples of the form, with the work of the BAM, whose manifestos have been studied as such, hoping to clarify Ward's and Childress's contributions to the Black manifesto tradition. This comparison makes it difficult to maintain a firm break between the Popular Front and the BAM, even as their differences are salient.[60] Since manifestos create the effect of history, however, it's important to note that

those of the BAM often implicitly or explicitly contended that the theatre of preceding generations was not experimental, was too integrationist, and had no interest in Black nationalism or community building. Nevertheless, Ward's and Childress's manifestos remain "anticipatory" of the BAM's vanguardism.[61] As Margo Natalie Crawford argues, anticipation names the "flow of black aesthetics," allowing us to see the complex ways in which later Black movements "are actually anticipated by the earlier movements." Crawford, like Elizabeth Alexander's groundbreaking work on Black experimental poetry, stresses that "blackness is an always already unsettled aesthetic mix of the experimental and that which has become so familiar it is no longer recognized as experimental."[62] The Negro people's theatre can be read anew as experimental, as modern; however, there is still a tendency to spatiotemporalize modernist theatre as emanating from the West and ending at World War II to be succeeded by postmodernism. Rather, artists of the Negro people's theatre were on the verge of a renewed modernism, particularly the "new modernities" of the decolonizing world in the 1940s and 1950s.[63]

Recovering Ward's and Childress's work as part of the Black theatre manifesto tradition reveals how they intervene into the act of creating history. As working artists, they were fully aware of the impossibilities of radical Black theatremaking in the 1940s and 1950s, from the mundane problems that always make theatremaking in the United States difficult (namely, lack of money) to the extraordinary ways in which Black theatre encountered the full weight of the repressive Cold War state through FBI and State Department censorship, surveillance, and harassment. Against these impossibilities, Ward and Childress nevertheless insist on possible futures. As manifestations of historical theory, they align with Lisa Lowe's insistence that "it is possible to conceive the past, not as fixed or settled, not as inaugurating the temporality into which our present falls, but as a configuration of multiple contingent possibilities, all present, yet none inevitable."[64] These manifestos are histories of counter-futures that imagined Black theatre in expansive and liberatory ways and map out histories of futures that did not, but might still, come to pass.

Notes

1. Theodore Ward, "Our Conceptions of the Theatre and Its Function," George Norford's Scrapbook on the Negro Playwrights Company, MicroformR-3661, Research and Reference, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
2. Alvah Bessie, "New Negro Theater," *New Masses*, September 24, 1940.
3. Negro Playwrights Company, "A Professional Theatre with an Idea," MicroformR-3661,

George Norford's Scrapbook on the Negro Playwrights Company, Research and Reference, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. The NPC was originally the brainchild of Abram Hill, who would instead dedicate his energies to the less explicitly political American Negro Theatre. The Communist-affiliated Ward took over the mantle of leadership and directed it into a left-wing cultural organization. For more on the NPC, see James V. Hatch, *Black Theater, U.S.A.: Forty-Five Plays by Black Americans 1847–1974* (New York: Free Press, 1974).

4. Brian Dolinar, *The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Depression Generation* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012).
5. Ward, "Our Conceptions of the Theatre and Its Function."
6. Ward, "Our Conceptions of the Theatre and Its Function."
7. Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 2, 22.
8. Melissa Barton, "'Speaking a Mutual Language': The Negro People's Theatre in Chicago," *TDR: The Drama Review* 54, no. 3 (2010): 58.
9. Errol. G Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 349. The NPC seemingly folded after sixty-four performances of *Big White* Fog, perhaps because it failed to establish a sustained Harlem audience. Alan Wald reports, "Ward later estimated that 24,000 white New Yorkers attended the performances, but that only 1,500 African Americans came, indicating a failure to develop roots in the community." Alan M. Wald, "Theodore Ward," in *Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance*, ed. Steven Tracy (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 331.
10. Alice Childress, "For a Negro Theatre," *Masses & Mainstream*, no. 4 (1951): 61–64. Childress, "For a Strong Negro People's Theatre," *Daily Worker*, February 16, 1951. While Ward and Childress worked closely together in left-wing organizations during the 1940s and '50s, by the 1970s, Ward had expressed in personal correspondence his belief that Childress was disinclined to help him connect with Joseph Papp and that she expressed professional "bitterness" at Ward's prominent placement in Doris Abramson's study, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre, 1925–1959*. Ward to James Hatch, June 25, 1974, Folder 5, Theodore Ward Collection, Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives, Emory University, Atlanta.
11. *Florence* debuted in 1949 with the American Negro Theatre, directed by Childress, and was later produced with the CNA in 1950, along with Childress's *Just a Little Simple*, her adaptation of Langston Hughes's "Simple" columns for the *Chicago Defender*.
12. Lyon, *Manifestoes*, 14.
13. Laura Winkiel, *Modernism, Race, and Manifestos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1.
14. Laura Cull and Will Daddario, eds. and intro., *Manifesto Now! Instructions for Performance, Philosophy, Politics* (Chicago: intellect, 2013), 8.
15. Michael Richardson, ed., *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (New York: Verso, 1996).
16. As Winkiel notes "the recent resurgence in manifesto criticism pays little to no attention to imperialism or racial difference," an oversight that fails to attend to the ways in which race and Empire structure the manifesto (and vice versa). Winkiel, *Modernism, Race, and Manifestos*, 3. I employ major studies on the manifesto published before Winkiel's

for their careful attention to form and genre (especially Janet Lyon, Marjorie Perloff, and Martin Puchner). At the same time, their historical narratives of the manifesto reproduce what Cathy Park Hong has called "delusions of whiteness in the avant-garde." Hong's brilliant critique attends to the way in which the politics of form has been leveraged to silence and marginalize poets of color, whose work is assigned the (presumed lesser) status of "identity politics" if they broach the subject of race. Perloff in particular, Hong writes, "has persistently set up these racially encoded oppositions and the sentiment is always the same: these indistinguishable minority writers with their soft, mediocre poetry and fiction are taking over our literature." Cathy Park Hong, "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde," *Lana Turner* 7 (2014).

17. Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Garde* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 71.
18. Cull and Daddario, *Manifesto Now!*, 3.
19. Winkiel, *Modernism, Race, and Manifestos*, 10.
20. Childress, "For a Negro Theatre," 61.
21. See Martin Puchner, "Manifesto = Theatre." *Theatre Journal* 54, no. 3 (2002): 449–65. Both Perloff and Puchner explore the ways in which manifestos threaten to destabilize the distinction between art and theatre (Perloff engages Michael Fried's modern art criticism) and performativity and theatre (Puchner, J. L. Austin). Marjorie Perloff, "'Violence and Precision': The Manifesto as Art Form," *Chicago Review* 34, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 65–101; Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*.
22. Harry J. Elam Jr., "Editorial Comment: 'A Black Thing,'" *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 4 (2005): vii–xiv.
23. Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 31.
24. Kate Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 73.
25. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).
26. August Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand," *American Theatre*, June 20, 2016.
27. Childress, "For a Negro Theatre," 61.
28. For more on the ANT, its school, and Childress's work therein, see Jonathan Shandell, *The American Negro Theatre and the Long Civil Rights Era* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018).
29. Childress, "For a Negro Theatre," 62.
30. Langston Hughes "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 27–30; Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 32–44.
31. Smithsonian Folkways, Twitter Post, July 20, 2022. For more on Teer's creative manifestos and theory, see La Donna L. Forsgren, *In Search of Our Warrior Mothers: Women Dramatists of the Black Arts Movement* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018).
32. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Verso, 2008).
33. Childress, "For a Negro Theatre," 62.
34. Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: NYU Press 2018), 6.

35. Childress, "For a Negro Theatre," 63.
36. Dossett, *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, 16.
37. Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *TDR* 12, no. 4 (1968): 34.
38. Harry J. Elam Jr., "The TDR Black Theatre Issue: Refiguring the Avant-Garde," in *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*, ed. James M. Harding and John Rouse (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 41.
39. All these plays are included in the Black Revolutionary Theatre issue of *TDR* 12, no. 4 (1968).
40. Lyon, *Manifestoes*, 14.
41. Chrystyna Dail, *Stage for Action: U.S. Social Activist Theatre in the 1940s* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 97.
42. Shadow Zimmerman, "Mussolini and Marinetti: Performing Citizenship in Fascist Italy," *Theatre Symposium* 28 (2020): 43.
43. The Black nationalism that Ward and Childress pursue is more in line with the CPUSA's Black Belt thesis than the Black Nationalism of the 1960s–1970s. Yet, they also resist a doctrinaire party line by theorizing what Mary Helen Washington calls a "racialized radicalism," which includes a commitment to interracial organizing and a celebration of Black popular culture. Washington, *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 131.
44. Washington, *The Other Blacklist*, 11.
45. Childress, "For a Negro Theatre," 63.
46. Laura Branca, personal interview, May 25, 2022.
47. Childress's FBI file can be viewed online. On the CNA's closure, see Washington, *The Other Blacklist*, 140. The CNA was essentially the cultural wing of the National Negro Congress (1935–1947), "the era's most militant civil rights organization," and its theatre division was headed by Childress, which made her a high-profile target for the FBI. Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 3.
48. Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 2–3.
49. Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 288.
50. Here, I'm inspired by the idea of "Black performance communities" that Dossett develops throughout *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*. Performance communities are a matrixed field consisting of audiences, performers, playwrights, journalists, and activists—a broad counterpublic—brought together in and through theatre.
51. Washington, *The Other Blacklist*, 136.
52. Alice Childress, "Gold Through the Trees," in *Selected Plays*, ed. Kathy A. Perkins (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 44.
53. Judith E. Smith, "Finding a New Home in Harlem: Alice Childress and the Committee for the Negro in the Arts," American Studies Faculty Publication Series 18 (2017): 16–17. *Gold*'s performance linked up with a larger Black political and cultural movement. For example, Canada Lee "appeared as a main speaker at an [Americans for South African Resistance] mass meeting marking the announcement of the Defiance Campaign on April 6, 1952" at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church, where Adam Clayton Powell was pastor, "before heading downtown to join an antiapartheid rally held outside the South African consulate General." Nicholas Grant, "Crossing the Black Atlantic: The Global

Antiapartheid Movement and the Racial Politics of the Cold War," *Radical History Review* 119 (Spring 2014): 81.

54. Sell uses the slogan "Black is beautiful," popularized as part of the BAM and Black Power as an example. "On the face of it, this would seem to be an aesthetic matter," but, Sell argues, the BAM's "attack on racist standards of beauty demanded a comprehensive . . . engagement with white power, combining representational strategy, media politics, institutional intervention, discursive recalibration, economic development, and an altered, consciously 'black' practice of everyday life." For the BAM, a "deftly turned barroom toast" could accomplish this, as could a painting or a poem. Artists of the Negro people's theatre were less willing to admit an equivalence among cultural forms, and drama held a rarified place in the estimation of the era's artists. Mike Sell, "Resisting the Question, 'What Is an Avant-Garde?'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): 766–67.
55. Ward uses a slightly different version of this quote than appears in Langston Hughes, "Writers, Words and the World," in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Vol. 9: Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. Christopher C. De Santis (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 198–99.
56. Hughes, "Writers, Words and the World," 198.
57. James Smethurst, "'Pat Your Foot and Turn the Corner': Amiri Baraka, the Black Arts Movement, and the Poetics of a Popular Avant-Garde," *African American Review* 37, nos. 2/3 (2003): 263.
58. The Negro Freedom Rallies were staged by the Negro Labor Victory Committee, part of the National Negro Congress; Dolinar, *The Black Cultural Front*, 50. In addition to having his play staged, Hughes also reported on the second annual Negro Freedom Rally at Madison Square Garden on June 7, 1943. Then a columnist for *The Chicago Defender*, Hughes singled about Primus's performance for special attention. See Hughes, "On Leaping and Shouting," *Langston Hughes and The Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics, and Culture 1942–62*, ed. Christoper C. De Santis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 199–200.
59. "The Black Arts Movement believes that your ethics and your aesthetics are one." Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *TDR* 12, no. 4 (1968): 31.
60. James Smethurst has extensively documented the continuities between the Popular Front and the Black Arts Movement. For example, see Smethurst, "Pat Your Foot and Turn the Corner."
61. Of course, Ward and Childress were not just anticipatory of the Black Arts Movements but, in certain ways, members of the movement, even if they frequently criticized predispositions that they saw as undercutting its radicalism. Ward had a major resurgence in the 1970s, largely due to his affiliation with the Free Southern Theater, where he spent two months in 1976 as their writer-in-residence, during which time they produced *Our Lan'*. Ward was still very much committed to interracial organizing throughout his life and was wary of certain separatist tendencies he saw in the Black Power and Arts Movements; Theodore Ward Collection, Camille Billops, and James V. Hatch Archives, Emory University, Atlanta. See also Michelle Y. Gordon "Theodore Ward and the Black Arts Movement," James Weldon Johnson Institute Colloquium Series (Emory University, Atlanta, GA, April 11, 2016). Childress's Black Power–era plays—*Wine in the Wilderness*, *Mojo*, and *Wedding Band*—call out hypocrisy within radical movements, particularly that which holds Black women to different standards than Black men.

62. Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 40. See Elizabeth Alexander, "New Ideas About Experimental Poetry," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 50, no. 4 (2011). A manifesto-meets-essay, Alexander's arguments about experimental work are highly portable and applicable to theatre, as well.
63. Susan Stanford Friedman, "Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies," *Modernism/modernity* 13, no. 3 (2006): 427. For more about the experimentation of the people's theatre, see Cheryl Black and Jonathan Shandell, eds., *Experiments in Democracy: Interracial and Cross-Cultural Exchange in American Theatre, 1912–1945* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016).
64. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 175.