

Douglas A. Jones Jr.

DISTURB THE HIVE

“Where do we find ourselves?”¹ We ask some permutation of this question in response to life events, as Ralph Waldo Emerson does to open his haunting essay on the death of his young son, the magisterial “Experience” (1844). Commemorations also compel us to make such accountings, to break from the requisite, often monotonous routines of everyday life to assess our evolutions. The sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the American Society for Theatre Research offers such an occasion, and this forum’s invitation to imagine and, perhaps, sway the direction of the organization’s discursive and institutional practices over the next decade or more requires, first of all, estimating where we, as scholars of theatre and performance culture, find ourselves. Although these inspections would certainly reveal actions and innovations worthy of commemoration, the more important task is to lay bare and come to grips with those assumptions, ruts, and shibboleths in our respective fields of inquiry that have become so ingrained that they have achieved a kind of sacrosanctity. We must contest and, in many cases, abandon these conceptual and analytical habits: such efforts, though to the detriment of ideology, will be to the good of the discipline and the enrichment of our individual scholarly sensibilities.

To be sure, those authorities and critical commonplaces we claim in our scholarship are most often sources of crucial influence and thus merit real admiration. But danger emerges when we allow norms to go unchecked, to attain an unimpeachable, almost totemic standing in the field. This sort of piety stunts scholarly production because it frustrates individual thinking and creativity. When this happens, the work or idea that once inspired “[i]nstantly . . . becomes noxious,” as Emerson puts it in “The American Scholar” (1837). “The guide is a tyrant. We sought a brother, and lo, a governor,” he continues.² When we confine ourselves to this governor’s terrain—that is, the theoretical, methodological, historiographical, or evidentiary borders he established and continues to regulate, however benignly—we are denizens of a hive mind: that is, otherwise thinking persons who not only refuse to maneuver (intellectually or culturally) outside someone else’s parameters but, more critically, cannot imagine even doing so.

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As we go about our writing and teaching in the coming decade, then, we would do well to disturb the hive as often as we can.

An ongoing wrangle in (African) American literary studies instantiates the sort of productive disruption I am advocating. In 2011, when literary scholar Kenneth Warren published *What Was African American Literature?*, the book's tendentious thesis promptly ignited a firestorm. It argued that black-authored writing from the Jim Crow era cohered as a discrete, ineluctable response to the social world African Americans endured at that time, but that the cultural and legal dismantling of racial segregation in the late 1960s consequently ended African American literature as a cohesive corpus and literary enterprise.³ Critics (or, in many cases, denouncers) pounced on Warren's contentions, and venues ranging from special symposia and preeminent literary journals to more public outlets such as the *Los Angeles Review of Books* furnished space to debate whether African American literature had, indeed, come to an end. These engagements, the majority of which have been to refute Warren's thesis as well as the sociological and literary-historiographical scaffoldings upon which he built it, have been nothing but a boon to the field because they have compelled scholars and their students to place fresh eyes and ears on old texts, to interrogate the functionality of the prescriptive tactics we use to understand historical operations of the relation to race and writing, and to query the utility of "tradition" as an approach to how we theorize cultural politics. In sum, the book triggered a robust disturbance of the field's investigative norms that has already yielded new critical paradigms and priorities.

Although prose is his main interest, Warren's provocations bear on the study of African American theatre. For example, Errol Hill and James Hatch articulate scholarly consensus when they define African American theatre as the product of "unique conditions," that is, "the slave trade that brought to America millions of black Africans who remain the only minority group forcibly transported to the United States and enslaved. Yet, in spite of and through this experience, African Americans over time have created and maintained a theatre of their own."⁴ By this definition, though, most of the contemporary plays and practices we teach and exegete in our scholarship as African American theatre would not qualify as such: though descendants of African slaves continue to contribute vitally to American theatre culture, to suggest that their efforts cohere into "theatre[s] of their own" would be amiss.⁵ (Artists thriving on the so-called urban theatre circuit satisfy the features Hill and Hatch propose, but by and large scholars have found this theatre culture's aesthetic practices and religious conservatism too odious to offer it their sustained attention.)⁶ In common scholarly praxis, a director or playwright's bloodline seems to be enough to hail her a contributor to African American theatre; yet outside reclamation projects, what analytically useful purpose does adducing bloodlines serve? Don't such biologicistic hermeneutics inevitably obscure aesthetic interventions and political potentialities we might otherwise pursue and locate in the work? More broadly, how ironic is it that as we strive to dislodge noxious racial essentialisms, we often fall back on several of our own essentialisms—analytical, racial, and theoretical—in our studies of American theatre makers of African descent?

I submit that over the coming decade we use these pages and allied platforms to confront our most wonted creeds and habits. For scholars of race and American theatre, for example, this will mean abandoning the meretricious racial ipso facto: that is, refusing to accept an artist's racial ancestry as a ready and stable prism onto her practice's contributions. To take such an approach will not lead to proclamations declaring African American theatre over, but it would reveal that a great deal of what we study and teach under the rubric of African American theatre does not belong therein.

ENDNOTES

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Prose*, ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), 226–49, at 226.

2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Prose*, 91–109, at 95.

3. Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

4. Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

5. Many other theories of black cultural particularism, such as those exemplified by W. E. B. Du Bois's "four fundamental principles" of a "real Negro theatre" (it should be "About us," "By us," "For us," and "Near us"), would be even more restrictive than Hill and Hatch's more capacious variant. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre," *Crisis* 32.3 (1926): 134–6, at 134.

6. See Campbell Robertson, "The World of Black Theater Becomes Ever Bigger," *New York Times*, 21 February 2007, E1.