

Black Performance Theory. Eds Thomas F. DeFrantz & Anita Gonzalez. Duke UP, 2014

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**BLACK-AUTHORED LYNCHING DRAMA'S
CHALLENGE TO THEATER HISTORY**

Of what use is fiction to the colored race at the present crisis in its history? Fiction is of great value to any people as a preserver of manners and customs—religious, political, and social. It is a record of growth and development from generation to generation. No one will do this for us: we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history, and, as yet, unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race.

—**Pauline Hopkins, preface to *Contending Forces*, 1900**

Drama more than any other art form except the novel embodies the whole spiritual life of a people; their aspirations and manners, their ideas and ideals, their fantasies and philosophies, the music and dignity of their speech—in a word, their essential character and culture and it carries this likeness of a people down the centuries for the enlightenment of remote times and places.

—**Theophilus Lewis, theater critic for the black newspaper *Messenger*, 1926**

Lynching, as an antiblack form of political terrorism, was a distinctly post-emancipation phenomenon. Whites suffered financial losses whenever a slave died, but once blacks were no longer chattels, there was no incentive to avoid killing them. The Reconstruction era saw an increase in racial violence that only intensified in post-Reconstruction, when federal troops left the South in 1877, inaugurating what historian Rayford Logan later termed the “Nadir” of U.S. race relations. The number of lynchings rose throughout the 1880s, reaching its first apex in 1892, but the post-Reconstruction decades were also punctuated by race riots. Indeed, violence helped turn the century, with the massacre in Wilmington, North Carolina, during the elections in 1898, the Atlanta Riot in 1906, and the mayhem that overtook Springfield, Illinois, President Lincoln’s birthplace, in 1908

(Rucker and Upton). Thus, the period known as the Progressive Era was also one of racial terrorism against blacks; understanding turn-of-the-century U.S. culture is therefore impossible when historians bracket bloodshed.

Yet, unfortunately, when scholars attend to racial violence, artistic output can be easily overlooked. Following Rayford Logan's lead in seeing these years as a "low point" for African Americans, many assume that the struggle to survive left blacks little energy for other endeavors. Despite this assumption, black political activism cannot be denied. The records of organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) certify that blacks more than survived; they worked for equality for themselves and for future generations.

As my epigraphs make clear, however, there remained an awareness that traditional political activism must be accompanied by artistic expression. African American novelist Pauline Hopkins argued in 1900 for the value of writing fiction even in times of crisis. While her novel *Contending Forces* presented "both sides of the dark picture—lynching and concubinage," it also preserved the race's religious, political, and social customs by depicting its "inmost thoughts and feelings" (15, 14). Hopkins's work thereby asserts the value of African American culture. If the race's traditions must be maintained and recorded, then blacks' self-conceptions were worth reaffirming. After all, their customs reflected their view of themselves, not what mainstream discourse said about them. Thus, even creative work produced during adversity is not solely a response to outside forces; it is an attempt to safeguard community perspectives.

If adversity intensified the need for self-affirmation, and black-authored novels helped fill that need, the same can be said for the increasing value placed on serious, nonmusical black drama at the turn into the twentieth century. Following theater critic Theophilus Lewis, I contend that drama was perhaps even more responsive than fiction to the historical moment because it directly addressed the fact that theater and lynching were working together to strengthen the assault on African Americans' self-conceptions. In the early 1900s, blacks were acknowledged on the mainstream American stage in the most stereotypical ways. At worst, the images were denigrating and dehumanizing; at best, comical. At the same time, mob violence became increasingly theatrical. Indeed, shortly after the NAACP came into existence, an incident in Livermore, Kentucky, epitomized the degree to which lynching and U.S. theater were infinitely compatible. In 1911, Will Porter was tied to an opera house stage, where "his body [was] riddled with one hundred bullets by mob members who purchased tickets to participate" (Zangrando, 26). As historian Philip Dray reports, fifty men paid to occupy seats; the more

expensive orchestra seats came with the freedom to fire one's gun six times, while those in the balcony were asked to limit themselves to one shot (178).

It is no coincidence that the American stage would prove as suitable for killing African Americans as for portraying them in dehumanizing ways. Stereotypical depictions of blacks as submissive uncles, vacuous buffoons, or uncivilized brutes helped create an atmosphere conducive to racial violence—and vice versa. If such violence seems out of place in an opera house, that may say more about false distinctions that have emerged in scholarship than about the historical moment under consideration. Generally, U.S. theater history does not reflect an understanding of how compatible theater and lynching were, yet African Americans who lived during this period very consistently identified connections between these cultural forces. In fact, they developed the unique genre of lynching drama during this time. Their doing so suggests that African American communities recognized the extent to which theater and lynching *worked together* to make blacks' conceptions of themselves as modern citizens irrelevant.

While theater and lynching joined forces in order to erase blacks' "record of growth and development," some African American poets and fiction writers turned to drama "as a preserver of manners and customs." As pioneering theater scholars Kathy Perkins and Judith Stephens established in 1998, "a lynching drama is *a play in which the threat or occurrence of a lynching, past or present, has major impact on the dramatic action*" (3). American writers had always addressed racial violence, but the mode developed "when playwrights moved beyond brief references and focused on a specific lynching incident" (Perkins and Stephens, 4). What is most striking about the earliest plays in this tradition is their focus on the black home. Black-authored lynching plays present mob violence more as a crime against households than against bodies. They take the audience indoors, where widows and children suffer, and the scripts barely describe—never mind portray—physical violence. As the survivors' grief overwhelms the scripts, the genre suggests that the brutality continues long after a corpse would have deteriorated. Thus, the plays direct the gaze away from what the song made famous by Billie Holiday called "strange fruit." Readers and viewers are made to focus on, not the body, but the household from which it was taken. These plays present the black home as the lynched body. A body is recognizable because it coheres and has integrity, and the same is true for a home. By presenting intact households marked by their harmony and happiness, the scripts can detail their mutilation. In these plays, the home is mutilated just as a body can be. When an honorable father, brother, or son is taken from the family, the household is metaphorically castrated and its head removed.¹

It was particularly important to place in the archive evidence of devastated households and the pain experienced by lynch victims' loved ones because society denied that these stable households ever existed. In fact, the mob was continuing the work that slavery had done to destroy black families. Under slavery, romantic bonds among blacks were disregarded, and those who had children often saw them sold. After emancipation, many worked to reestablish familial ties, searching for lost wives and husbands, daughters and sons, sisters and brothers. However, African Americans' efforts to establish and maintain stable homes, and to reassemble broken families, often made them targets of lynching. After all, mob violence was a way of denying "black people public recognition of their identities as husbands and wives, parents and children" (Rosen, *Terror in the Heart*, 225).

As a number of black authors became lynching dramatists, they seem to have resolved that, even if some families did not remain intact to pass down stories from generation to generation, a broader racial family could do so—through intimate, performance-centered rituals. As I discuss elsewhere, the majority of lynching plays written in the midst of mob violence were one-acts, which were not attractive to theater practitioners but were conducive to publication in periodicals, including the NAACP's *Crisis*. Magazines already cherished by African Americans, and routinely read communally, now contained scripts that prompted performances or dramatic readings about the injustices of lynching. Because these one-act scripts capture the "ideas and ideals," "fantasies and philosophies," of African Americans living in the midst of mob violence, they remind scholars that this historical moment was the nadir, but it was also the postbellum/pre-Harlem era (see McCaskill and Gebhard). Thus, the genre offers guidance for assessing the accuracy of patterns that have emerged in historical accounts of the period.

At a time when lynching photographs circulated in newspapers and as picture postcards, depicting mob victims as isolated brute rapists who cared nothing for stable domesticity, these plays focused on the families and communities devastated by black male absence. The genre suggests that mourning is the proper response to lynching because the mob's victims are not isolated brutes but often family men targeted after they had reached a level of success that enraged the mob because it bespoke black progress and citizenship rather than subordination. Ultimately, lynching drama survives in the archive as not only a record preserving truths that the mob sought to erase but also a challenge to American theater history more generally. Namely, it demands a reassessment of the tendency to separate U.S. theater history from the nation's record of racial violence.

Rethinking Mainstream American Theater History: The Theater/Lynching Alliance

Blacks living and writing at the height of mob violence interpreted their surroundings critically and equipped their communities to do the same. While lynching rituals and photographs sent a powerful message that African Americans were not citizens, black writers, philosophers, and activists questioned mainstream assertions. Lynching plays emerged from this effort; they stand as evidence of blacks' critical readings of the nation's discourses and practices. African Americans understood theater and lynching to be more interdependent than separate. After all, when lynchings became spectacular by the 1890s, their ability to terrorize relied increasingly on theatricality. Especially between 1890 and 1930, lynchings were frequently theatrical productions. The violence began to follow a predictable script, and "white participants would often bring food and drink to the place of execution." Furthermore, "to insure that an audience was available for really special lynchings, announcements of time and place were sometimes advertised in newspapers." Once in attendance, "white men, women, and children would hang or burn (frequently both), shoot, and castrate the [alleged] offender, then divide the body into trophies" (Harris, *Exorcising Blackness*, 6). In other words, newspapers often announced the time and location so that crowds could gather, and spectators knew that they would see familiar characters (so-called black "rapists" and white "avengers") perform a predictable script of forced confession and mutilation. Souvenir hunting would complete the drama with audience participation, but because the most coveted keepsakes (such as the victim's bones and burnt flesh) were in limited supply, pictures became souvenirs. These pictures now survive to verify lynching's theatrical qualities and the variety of stages that mobs claimed, for their victims dangle not just from trees, but also light posts, telephone poles, and bridges (see Allen et al.).

Because African Americans were attuned to the power that theatricality lent to the mob, when black authors began writing lynching plays, they continued the tradition of exposing the ways in which theater and lynching worked together to conceal evidence of black humanity and achievement. At least since the 1890s, African American activists addressed what I term "the theater/lynching alliance"—the way that mobs relied on theatricality, and the mainstream stage relied on the mob's themes, characters, and symbols.

African American leaders often insisted on addressing theater and lynching simultaneously. Ida B. Wells spoke of lynchings whose conveners functioned as emcees, or masters of ceremonies, and she noted when the "programme . . . was carried out to the letter" (52). Similarly, when a lynching took place on the campus of the University of Missouri in 1923, W. E. B. Du-

Bois declared, “Many of our American universities have long defended the institution, but they have not been frank or brave enough actually to arrange a mob murder so that the students might see it in detail” (*Crisis*, June 1923, 55; see also Dray, 294). As the student body became the mob’s audience, the university could be said to have provided a demonstration of the practices that constitute a “good” lynching. That is, pupils had an opportunity to observe what many called “lynchcraft”—which was a sort of art appreciation, not unlike the ability to recognize excellent “stagecraft.”² In all instances, the genius of the craft was that it left little doubt that blacks were anything but the brutes or buffoons that the mob or mainstream stage said they were. For the average observer, the mob depicts those with black faces as rapists only because they are, and blacks appear onstage as buffoons simply as a matter of truth. Recognizing the effectiveness of these cultural institutions, African Americans often worked to expose the alliance that constantly tried to destroy black dignity.

Writing about lynching in dramatic form was therefore simply the next logical step for those vulnerable to this powerful partnership. Still, by even more directly addressing theater and lynching simultaneously, the playwrights demonstrated their immediate recognition of what scholars are rediscovering: theater and lynching were not discrete entities that sometimes cooperated; they were interdependent. Like those at the last turn of the century who recognized “lynchcraft,” scholars such as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Trudier Harris, and Robyn Wiegman have shown that race-based lynching was explicitly theatrical. Hall asserts that lynching relied on spectacle and spectators beginning in the 1890s: “Even as outbreaks of mob violence declined in frequency, they were increasingly accompanied by torture and sexual mutilation” (330). Partaking in such a production gave whites the satisfaction of seeing the accused tortured, not just killed. Hall also argues that reports of the incidents became increasingly graphic. The victim’s agony was described in detail, and so was the crime that supposedly precipitated it: the alleged rape of a white woman by a black man. Therefore, Hall dubs the discourse surrounding lynching “folk pornography,” thereby indicating that it was a shared, voyeuristic discourse that expanded the number of audience members. Even those who did not attend the lynching “viewed” it with their mind’s eye by consuming the story and taking pleasure in its details (Hall, 335).

Trudier Harris’s *Exorcising Blackness* and Robyn Wiegman’s *American Anatomies* build on Hall’s work and similarly note the importance of spectacle. Harris emphasizes the ritualized nature of the violence and argues that crowds soon counted on a familiar ceremony (2). Thus, the obligatory accusation, forced confession, mutilation, and souvenir hunting became a sort of script. Wiegman focuses on why castration became the mutila-

tion of choice and asserts: “Lynching figures its victims as the culturally abject—monstrosities of excess whose limp and hanging bodies function as the specular assurance that the racial threat has not simply been averted but rendered incapable of return” (81). The assurance was specular because the crowd was comforted by the sight of subdued black manhood.

I would add, though, that because it was a theatrical ritual, there were many signs of the white participants’ dominance. The “sign system” through which they created and conveyed meaning included much more than words and static images. Surely, it mattered that they heard the victim’s screams and moans and smelled his burning flesh (see Patterson). Accordingly, newspaper reports noted the crowd’s cheers in addition to describing the victim’s howls and contortions and the unmistakable odor of a burning human body. Like good theater reviewers, journalists tried to capture the dramatic moments and sensual pleasures of theatrical production.

Thus, both the intention of mob violence (to cast lynching as a community-wide response to a black threat) and its ability to convey its message (“know your place”) resided in its theatricality. However, the work that has illuminated these truths has said little about stage performance at the turn of the century. Few have analyzed how the mainstream stage lent credence to *and benefited from* racial violence.

Yet African Americans living in the midst of lynching recognized both sides of the theater/lynching partnership. The earliest black lynching playwrights left a unique archive recording their awareness of the practices that defined their historical moment. Their works offer insights that scholars have not gleaned from other documents. When this archive is placed on par with other cultural artifacts of the same period, one finds that U.S. theater cooperated with the mob in two major ways: (1) it sometimes explicitly legitimated racial violence; (2) more often, it established its own relevancy to the nation by translating lynching’s tropes, themes, and symbols.

The American stage was most explicitly used to define lynching as a patriotic duty by Baptist minister Thomas Dixon Jr., whose white supremacist novels *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905) were best sellers. After the extraordinary success of *The Clansman* in 1905, Dixon wrote a play version of the novel and formed two acting troupes to tour the country simultaneously and bring his work to life (Gunning, 29; Cripps, 52). Dixon’s novels had already cast black men as rapists, but putting this image onstage intensified the effect by exploiting the range of meaning-making possibilities that accompany performance. Dixon’s violent dramatic vision found favorable conditions. Up to that point, the images of blacks that reigned onstage were that of the feminized Uncle Tom and the laughable buffoon—both

of whom confirmed that African Americans were unfit for citizenship. The beast rapist was relatively new but seemed the next logical step in blacks' descent, which had been foretold in (for example) newspaper editorials, political tracts, "scientific" studies, and fiction. Dixon simply dramatized the presumed realization of white suspicions and fears. There was already mainstream agreement that blacks were not citizens; indeed, they were labeled uncivilized, but their presence could be tolerated as long as they were considered harmless. Once deemed a threat, however, the "beast" must be killed. With these ideas circulating, the stage could easily communicate that, because black skin signifies degeneracy, lynching is a necessary evil. Used in this fashion, theater both excused past lynchings and touted the need for future mob activity. By disseminating images of blacks that put fear into white hearts, American theater defined racial violence as the answer for outrages against white women, white families, and the nation. In short, the mainstream stage helped give lynching its accepted meaning.³

U.S. theater historians have not claimed Dixon as a founding father, but black-authored lynching drama's inaugural text, Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel*, helps remind us of his importance as an American playwright.⁴ Grimké's determination to use drama to address lynching did not begin after the release of the film *Birth of a Nation* in February 1915, as some histories suggest. She was circulating her manuscript at least by January of that year (Hull, 117–23), so her interest in writing a play targeting a white audience predated *Birth*. Also, as Grimké's rationale for the play made clear, she was very much attuned to the damage done by stage images. If the impact of *Birth* is to be credited at all in connection to *Rachel*, it can only be in its earlier incarnation as Dixon's play.

In other words, Grimké recognized theater's contributions to its partnership with the mob; the popularity of Tom Shows and the success of stage versions of Dixon's novels suggested that theater was helping legitimate racial violence. Grimké's dramatic work was shaped by this awareness, and it helped to set several people and processes in motion that fueled the development of black drama. Given the many ways in which Grimké's text, and the performance of it, influenced her contemporaries, it should not be overlooked today as we work toward an understanding of this period.

Considering the awareness that inspired Grimké, I contend that though theater scholars have been silent on this point, with a closer look at Dixon as dramatist, it seems significant that his plays emerged at the same time that critics were insisting the American stage should instruct, not just entertain. In other words, it was time to use theater to shape national identity, to stop mounting European plays and use "native" drama. Critics felt that American writers of fiction and poetry had reached a literary standard that represented

the nation well and distinguished it from England; it was now time to *dramatize* American exceptionalism.⁵ That is, as William Dean Howells and others promoted the development of a uniquely American stage realism, Dixon's work did not exist in a separate realm but was helping to define realism's conventions and the ways audiences were encouraged to interpret physical features as indicative of an inner truth (especially significant at a time when African Americans appeared onstage only via whites in makeup).

Indeed, I contend that U.S. theater benefited from lynching by taking from it a grand set of themes, characters, and symbols. The brutal scenes acted out on the nation's trees, telephone poles, and bridges used readily recognized characters ("rapists" and "avengers"), and the discourse surrounding these events made for excellent drama. Real-life lynching incidents provided the perfect mixture of danger, passion, and triumph with which to elaborate the uniquely American narrative of white bravery versus black barbarity. In examining American distinctiveness, Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* suggests that those fleeing to the New World believed themselves to be exceptional men who branched out on their own; faced a wide, dark expanse; and tamed it. I would add that, by the 1890s—precisely because it worked within this master narrative—the lynching narrative became as powerful as the flag itself. The predictable lynching story built on existing American mythology but took it to new heights, by infusing it with a black sexual threat.

Building serious American drama upon such a mythic narrative was necessary because the United States did not have a long line of texts from a figure like Shakespeare providing the foundation for its national theater. It therefore chose to build its tradition on grand themes, and lynching helped create the identity that white men preferred at this time—that of masculine avenger, loyal brother, and protective father. Given these circumstances, Morrison's ideas extend to this transitional period in American drama history. Her examination of fiction writers ranging from Edgar Allan Poe to William Faulkner reveals "the ways that Americans chose to talk about *themselves* through a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always *choked* representation of an Africanist presence" (17, my emphasis). White writers frequently conceived of their identities, and those of their white characters, in opposition to an often unacknowledged Africanist presence, and this is no less the case for the nation's early mainstream dramatists.

While lynchers attracted audiences and their violence followed familiar scripts, mainstream playwrights dramatized American identity as one of heroic self-determination, and as they did so, they marked "true Americans" most often by denying black citizenship and black humanity, producing scenarios, images, and discourses not unlike those disseminated by the mob.

This is not to suggest that “black equals evil” was a new formulation. But it is significant that, as American theater was marked in the 1890s through the 1910s by the push and pull of melodrama and realism, and the struggle to guide audiences away from farce and comedy to an appreciation of serious drama and problem plays, it built its new identity around dark difference. As more and more critics made claims about theater’s potential to galvanize citizens and distinguish the nation from England, many of American theater’s modes relied on the mainstream audience’s aversion to blackness—which was intensified as photographs of lynch victims circulated.

As Morrison would predict, even when black characters do not figure prominently, theater’s strategies for providing entertainment, and encouraging audiences to identify with characters, centered on differentiating “whites” from “others.” For example, in 1895, William Gillette’s drama *Secret Service* created the cool, understated hero who still dominates American action adventures. Captain Thorne is in total control of himself and of every situation he encounters. He stands in “natural” opposition to Jonas, a black servant. The first time that Captain Thorne appears, he is escorted into the scene by Jonas—who bows submissively, speaks dialect, is humbly dressed, and is, in every way, clearly *not* in command. To similar effect, dramatist William Moody makes distinctions among the men who invade the heroine’s home on the western frontier in *The Great Divide* (1906). Ruth is afraid of all these criminals but soon realizes that she can survive by choosing one of them as a lover. It is no accident that, according to the stage directions, one is a “Mexican half-breed [and] the others are Americans.” For the audience and Ruth, the Mexican makes the white scoundrel she chooses seem like a prize.

Initially performed in 1895 and 1906, respectively, these American realist dramas emerged alongside the spectacle of lynching. Because photographs of mob victims were distributed as picture postcards, circulated in newspapers, and sometimes used by advertisers as attention-getting devices (see Everett; Smith, “Evidence”), lynching was as much a backdrop for these playwrights’ imaginations as was the recent slave past, western expansionism, and U.S. imperialism. Thus, extending Morrison’s ideas to early mainstream drama allows us to appreciate what blacks understood at the century’s turn, that lynching had infused *black* and *white*, *dark* and *light*, with unparalleled metaphorical intensity. Arguably, behind every characterization of a good, pure, or brave white person was the belief that blacks were brutes, whores, and buffoons. Because blackness was understood in an unfavorable way in virtually every sector of American society, it repeatedly reaffirmed positive assumptions about whiteness. Put another way, “nothing highlighted freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery” (Morrison, 38); nothing

elevated virgins like the existence of whores; and nothing produced (white) innocence like the consistent assumption of (black) guilt.

Acknowledging the interdependence of theater and lynching is particularly important because mainstream theater resided on America's stages and on its trees-turned-stages. American drama therefore cannot be excluded from Morrison's analysis of the uses of an Africanist presence: "Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as . . . not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; . . . not damned, but innocent" (52). Lynching helped to determine the affective responses stirred by the bodies that audiences saw on stage. Perhaps more important, as Morrison would hasten to add, mob violence *helped to determine what the dramatists could imagine in the first place*. Therefore, American theater at the turn of the century—as it increasingly abandoned European scripts for "native" ones—perhaps could not have developed and become a respected, citizen-shaping institution without maximizing the dramatic power of lynching, lynching narratives, and lynching photography.

Recognizing that theater and lynching were kin forms of knowledge production and cultural expression led many African Americans to engage theatricality, but they did so critically, intervening in its discourses and rejecting many of its tendencies. African Americans at the turn of the century knew that black bodies were central to lynching's theatrical power and to theater's signifying power, with both hinging on negative interpretations of the black body. I mean this in the most basic and most radical sense possible. At this time, a mutilated black body hanging from a tree was theatrical. This is why newspapers announced the time and location of lynchings, crowds gathered to see them, and journalists reviewed the performances. Just as consistently, a black man, woman, or child grinning and shuffling was theatrical.

In this climate, black dramatists offered scripts that emphasized the dignified presence of the black body. The earliest black-authored lynching plays do not focus on physical violence because the authors refused to replicate the dramas acted out on the nation's trees. Likewise, they would not put dancing, grinning characters on display at a time when those were the uses for black bodies in minstrelsy and musical comedy. Instead, lynching playwrights created characters who often quietly sit and read, debate the issues of the day, and show each other affection, activities that mainstream "realist" scripts rarely demanded of black bodies. African American domestic novels had already begun this work of defining black characters through activities that connoted sophistication and familial stability (see Tate, *Domestic Al-*

legories). It was time to create dramas that offered similar portraits, to be animated by amateurs, by the African American citizens whose real lives served as the black artist's inspiration and the mob's murderous motivation.

These scripts' survival certifies that African Americans understood the extent to which the workings of the theater/lynching alliance exceeded the mob's use of theatricality and had permeated the dynamics of mainstream stage performance. Lynching dramatists thus continued the work that activists such as Ida B. Wells had undertaken. That is, they assured African Americans that they were witnessing a multifaceted attempt to deny the race's accomplishments; they were witnessing lynchcraft and stagecraft at their best.

Notes

1. My findings are based on lynching plays written before 1930 by black authors. Women were most prolific: Angelina Weld Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Mary Burrill, Myrtle Smith Livingston, Georgia Douglas Johnson.

2. The term "lynchcraft" was fairly common in newspaper accounts and other discussions of lynching. See Dray, 30, 213, 233–34, 458.

3. It matters, then, that Dixon's stage work was so successful. As Cook (136–49) details, Dixon enrolled in a "dramatic technique" course in spring 1905. The play premiered in Norfolk, VA, on September 22. Expecting controversy, Dixon gave speeches between acts. His speech about the suffering of the white man was particularly effective and gained him much acclaim. After well-received stagings in Nashville and New Orleans, the play showed to "overflowing crowds" in cities such as Columbus, Indianapolis, and Topeka. In December, he gave a speech at Columbia University in which he explained why he would not tone down the piece. Success in the South and West led to significant press coverage before the New York opening on January 8, 1906, to "the largest crowd ever to attend a performance at the Liberty Theatre." The house was filled every night, despite some criticism. Demand was so great that "two additional companies were formed to fill the bookings for the play outside the city." The play toured the country for five years, "setting a record for touring productions."

4. Susan Harris Smith argues that early U.S. drama has often been marginalized because many plays were adaptations of novels, a bias she insists is arbitrary and problematic. I agree. Thus, that Dixon was adapting his novel is not a legitimate reason to bracket him from a realist tradition in American drama and theater.

5. Theater was often seen as a place of ill repute, so the emphasis Howells and others place on it to distinguish the United States from England must be seen in this light, as a sign of its increasing importance and legitimacy as a cultural institution undergirding nationalism. Susan Harris Smith notes that one reason for dismissal of American drama has been that many early American playwrights had been journalists (see also Richardson). "But," she insists, "if this movement has been written out of literary histories, it could and should be recovered and reexamined in cultural histories and certainly should be connected to the muckraking movement, *the rise of realism*, and the interaction between theatre and journalism" (26, my emphasis). I seek to do precisely that. See also Conquergood, "Lethal Theatre."