
Dossett, Kate. *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2020. pp. 338.

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/kl-2022-0046>

Kate Dossett’s book *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal* addresses a crucial aspect of American theater history about which so far little is known: the rich and productive work of the African American theater units of the government-sponsored Federal Theatre Project (FTP). Between 1935 and 1939, the United States government set up, as part of its New Deal artistic relief program, seventeen “Negro Units” at its centers in the South, Northeast, Midwest, and West Coast in order to provide work for unemployed African American theater artists and stage workers and to support the development of a theater for African American audiences. While much has been written about the Federal Theatre, to date very few scholars have put the work of its Black theater workers front and center, among them Rena Fraden (*Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre*, 1994) and Adrienne Macki Braconi (*Harlem’s Theaters*, 2015). Dossett builds on this work by shifting the focus from an analysis of theater productions to the mapping of the vivid discussions of dramatic scripts and productions that emerged in what she calls *Black performance communities* of the time – that is, in the broad network of writers, readers, actors, directors, spectators, and critics clustered around dramatic works thematizing the contemporary experience as well as history of African Americans. Thanks to a careful examination of a wide range of archival

materials – including published and unpublished manuscripts, readers' reports, correspondences, production books, reviews etc. – Dossett's approach yields rich insight into the ways, in which Black performance communities asserted their agency in shaping discussions over racial representation and civic participation, how they staked out a place for African American interests with regard to dramatic scripts, theatrical conventions, and institutional structures, in the process persistently pushing against and beyond the boundaries of what was deemed possible at the time. With this new emphasis on processes of contestation, revision, and reinterpretation, Dossett opens up the archive of Black agency and demonstrates the manifold ways in which African Americans actively partook in, contested, and shaped American intellectual and creative life of the period. While the active involvement of Black performance communities with theater manuscripts and productions was not unique to the New Deal (it was also pronounced during the "Little Negro Theater Movement" of the 1920s), it now took place in the center of mainstream American theater, involving not only theater artists, critics, and audiences, but also federal agencies, labor unions, professional associations, and civil rights organizations.

Dossett maps the Black performance communities' engagement with Federal Theatre productions with five major case studies. The first case study focuses on the FTP Seattle Negro Unit's provocative production of George Sklar and Paul Peters's leftist labor drama *Stevedore* in 1936, which sparked vivid discussion over the feasibility of interracial solidarity. Though written in advocacy of interracial unionism, the Seattle production emphasized a scene of armed Black resistance, with Black men and women on the barricades, ready to defend themselves against the onslaught of anti-Black violence even before the arrival of their white comrades, so that critics overwhelmingly interpreted *Stevedore* as a play about Black self-determination. When a year later, in 1937, the Seattle unit produced Theodore Brown's John-Henry-inspired drama *Natural Man* (1937) discussions in the Black performance community centered on the possibilities and meanings of Black heroism in a society where Black resistance is typically punished – a discussion that was refueled in 1941 in the context of the American Negro Theatre's restaging of Brown's play as well as Richard Wright's collaboration with white playwright Paul Green on a dramatic adaptation of his novel *Native Son*. In a third case study, Dossett unpacks how Black performance communities actively participated in the development of Black-authored Living Newspapers, such as the two issues devised by the Hartford Negro Unit between 1937 and 1939: *Liberty Deferred* and *Stars and Bars*. A fourth study provides a close reading of the discussions leading up to the Chicago unit's production of Theodore Ward's play *Big White Fog* in 1938. With a focus on issues of gender and racial division within Black families and political movements of the time (e.g. Garveyism, communism), the play provoked heated

discussions in Chicago's Black performance community, prompting Ward to revise the manuscript several times. A last chapter takes a close look at the Harlem unit's hugely successful production of *Haiti* in 1938, where the Black performance community helped to transform William Dubois's original, racist script into a celebration of Black resistance and agency. According to Dossett, the success of *Haiti* enabled the Black performance community to push the FTP to invest in Black dramatists. As a result, playwrights Hughes Allison and Theodore Brown were able to develop two provocative scripts about African American slavery: Allison's *Panyared* and Brown's *Go Down Moses*. At a time when white audiences flocked to see the Hollywood adaptation of Margret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1939), these two plays not only vividly thematized the horrors of slavery, they also insisted on foregrounding Black agency in the fight for abolition. Due to FTP's premature closure in the summer of 1939, neither of the two plays saw production.

Dossett's careful readings of the archival materials documenting above-mentioned productions powerfully convey how Black performance communities in Seattle, Chicago, Hartford, and Harlem skillfully negotiated the complex cultural-political field of New Deal theater. The incisive nature of their work is perhaps most apparent in the development of Black Living Newspapers. The Living Newspaper was, in many regards, the Federal Theatre Project's flagship genre. A fairly young theatrical form specializing in the creative dramatization of news, the Living Newspaper derived, just like all other Federal Theatre productions, its primary impulse from the task of putting a great number of people back to work. Indeed, with its extensive research and editorial staff, an enormous cast, and dozens of people backstage, the Living Newspaper was one of the FTP's most labor-intensive projects. Its elaborate productions and decidedly political profile attracted wide public attention.¹ In particular, the four, white-authored New York editions – *Injunction Granted* (1936), *Triple-A Plowed Under* (1936), *Power* (1937), and *One-Third of a Nation* (1939) – were intensely discussed at the time and, later on, also became the focus of FTP scholarship. Dossett, however, shifts critical attention to the Black-authored Living Newspapers of the New Deal period. Records indicate that at least four issues were authored by African Americans, of which only one remains extant: *Liberty Deferred*, devised by Abram Hill and John Silvera. A fifth issue, *Stars and Bars*, has been routinely attributed to white playwright Ward Courtney; as Dossett, however, shows it was written in close collaboration with the Hartford Negro Unit.² Unfortunately neither of the two

¹ For discussion of political dimension of FTP Living Newspapers, see Ilka Saal, *New Deal Theatre*, Palgrave, 2017.

² *Liberty Deferred* has been published in two anthologies: James V. Hatch and Ted Shine (eds.), *Black Theatre U.S.A.: Plays by African Americans. The Early Period, 1847-1938*. Free Press, 1996 and

issues saw production. Dossett's minute archival work, however, reveals how these manuscripts were shaped in complex processes of negotiation between Black performance communities and white FTP administrators.

Stars and Bars was designed to address the conditions of extreme poverty and discrimination suffered by Black communities in the North; more importantly, it combined this thematic focus with a parody of the genre's ostensive white liberalism, unmasking "the role of the Living Newspaper in reproducing the racial fictions that sustain white supremacy" (p. 94). One scene, for instance, directly challenges the representational authority of one of the Living Newspaper's favorite theatrical devices: the Loudspeaker. As the voice of epic narration and liberal reformism, the Loudspeaker typically insists that the nation's democratic founding principles are solid but simply haven't been implemented rigorously enough. Full equality and freedom for all could be obtained if only each individual citizen insisted, via the ballot, on their full implementation. In *Stars and Bars*, a Black protagonist repeatedly challenges this view of things as anchored in white privilege and ignorance. Demanding a change of editors, he eventually gets kicked off the stage by the Loudspeaker. *Stars and Bars* thus humorously "mocks the idea of the white Living Newspaper as a radical force in American culture" (p. 100) and unmasks how the very scripts of white liberal theater culture ultimately consolidate the entrenched racial formation.

The "role of American theater in sustaining racial hierarchies" (p. 97) is also foregrounded in *Liberty Deferred*, a Living Newspaper developed by Abram Hill and John Silvera in collaboration with the Hartford Negro Unit between 1937 and 1938. As readers at the National Service Bureau, Hill and Silvera were routinely asked to assess the suitability of white-authored "race dramas" for FTP production. The white voyeuristic lens that framed many of these plays became the satirical target of their own Living Newspaper about the ongoing history of racial inequity and injustice. The issue opens with a white couple watching a series of cliché performances of blackness, including "a team of Big Apple Dancers; a railroad porter, bowing and scraping for his meagre tips; bandana-wearing cotton-pickers of the Hollywood variety" (p. 103) – all of them enacted in an exaggerated manner that satirizes white expectations of Black performance. Through this framing device, Hill and Silvera, from the start, implicate the white observers – who in classic Living Newspaper fashion serve as allegorical proxies for the general white public – in the history of oppression that is then unfolded on stage.

Lorraine Brown (ed.). *Liberty Deferred and Other Living Newspapers of the 1930s*. George Mason UP, 1989. *Stars and Bars* remains unpublished, but available in manuscript form at the National Archive and Federal Theatre Project Collection at George Mason University.

A later scene, entitled “Lynchotopia,” targets the nexus between white spectatorship and anti-Black violence even more blatantly, when in a macabre competition for the most spectacular lynching, Black victims recount their horrific experience. “Foregrounding whiteness as an American problem was a bold and unprecedented move for a Living Newspaper,” Dossett comments (p. 105). Not surprisingly, *Liberty Deferred* received a lot of push-back. Emmett Lavery, director of the National Service Bureau, demanded multiple revisions. In particular, he asked Hill and Silvera to remove the framing focus on white spectatorship and implement the Living Newspaper’s tried technique of a teacher-student situation instead: an African American school teacher was to educate African American school children about continuing racial inequality in America. As Dossett correctly points out, the changes proposed by the FTP administrator would have shifted the focus to the Black community and turned *Liberty Deferred* into “a liberal critique of racism rather than a critique of liberal racism” (p. 111). While the authors responded to these suggestions with some cosmetic changes, they refused to give up their central critique of whiteness. Lavery eventually withdrew his support and the issue remained unstaged. Dossett’s comparative study of surviving manuscript versions and correspondences about them provides unprecedented insight into the racial representational politics that undergirded the Federal Theatre’s flagship theater format. It also shows how “in the hands of African Americans, the Living Newspaper became a highly self-reflexive vehicle that challenged, and sometimes changed, the ways in which power was brokered between white directors and Black creatives within the Federal Theatre” (p. 84).

Radical Black Theater in the New Deal allows for fresh insights into the significant role Black performance communities played in shaping American theater and public culture at the time. Dossett’s case studies compellingly demonstrate not only how African Americans profited from the opportunities provided by the government-sponsored Federal Theatre Project but also how, in turn, “the creativity and ambition of Black Americans [...] made certain things possible for the FTP” (p. 249). According to Dossett, Black-authored plays such as *Liberty Deferred*, *Stars and Bars*, *Natural Man*, *Big White Fog*, *Panyared*, and *Go Down Moses* – even when they remained unstaged – made the Federal Theatre “bolder” and “expanded the parameters of what was imagined possible for American theater in the Federal Theatre Project” (p. 251). Her unique contribution to the field of Theater History and American Studies consists in revealing how this push for change was the feat of large performance communities, rather than just individuals. Together these individuals and communities asserted their ideas and creativity and pushed for change from within the mainstream theater culture of the time. Dossett calls this work “radical.” While the study might have benefitted from a clear definition and a more discriminate usage of the term, it distinctly

establishes the extent to which Black theater artists and their performance communities in the 1930s pushed against the representational politics undergirding the existing structures of racial inequality. On this score, they also provided important impulses for the work of future performance communities, such as the American Negro Theatre (ANT) of the 1940s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, and thus for the building of a radical Black performance tradition.