Secrecy, Magic, & the One-Act Plays
of Harlem Renaissance
Women Writers

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For Virginia Azalee Jackson Hagood
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List of Abbreviations

BFP  Black Female Playwrights, edited by Kathy A. Perkins
FSE  Frye Street and Environs, Marita Bonner
NHTP Negro History in Thirteen Plays, edited by
     Willis Richardson and May Miller
PGDJ The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson,
      Georgia Douglas Johnson
PNL  Plays of Negro Life, edited by Alain Locke and
     Montgomery Gregory
SCRBC Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
SF   Strange Fruit, edited by Kathy A. Perkins and
     Judith L. Stephens
WW   Wines in the Wilderness, edited by
     Elizabeth Brown-Guillory
There are two people I would acknowledge first as being of crucial help to me on this book. One is Ethel A. Young-Minor, who first introduced me to these one-act plays in her graduate seminar on African American writers in the South. Her encouragement and enthusiasm have been and continue to be great boosts for me as a scholar. The second person to whom I owe much thanks is Kathy A. Perkins: where Ethel started me on this journey, Kathy kindly aided me at crucial points along the road by offering important help and information about Eulalie Spence, May Miller, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and the other writers discussed herein. I also want to acknowledge her importance in bringing these writers and their one-act plays to critical attention; she (and Judith L. Stephens, who has also kindly helped me) has done a tremendous and heroic service to the field in her textual work.

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legal to guide to completion, and it was a very thought-provoking reevaluation of the term “folk drama” and its relation to Hurston’s *Color Struck*. Likewise, Tinea Williams’s thesis on female lynching included excellent treatments of Mary P. Burrill’s plays. It is gratifying to know that these two fine scholars will be going on to write about these one-acts in rich and provocative ways, and I consider it a distinct honor to be associated with them.

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If we were a people much given to revealing secrets, we might raise monuments and sacrifice to the memories of our poets, but slavery cured us of that weakness. It may be enough, however, to have it said that we survive in exact relationship to the dedication of our poets (include preachers, musicians and blues singers).
—Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Nineteen judges, all of whom are crowded with their own literary duties, have consented promptly and eagerly to pass upon the merits of the contributions of Negroes to OPPORTUNITY’s contest. Their consent is both a gesture of friendliness toward a long submerged and virtually inarticulate group, and a recognition of the rich stores of material in Negro life to be exploited in the interest of American literature generally.
—*Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* (October 1924, 291)

I who am visible to you must also protect a certain reserve. Within the intention of appearing to you, there must also exist the intention of remaining invisible, of covering life and love with the shadow of a secret.
—Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two*

Yes I can lay my head on the rocks of Nowhere.
—Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*
Induction: JOYCE HETH

P. T. BARNUM’S first “exhibit” was a black woman named Joice Heth. She was the alleged 160+-year-old former slave nurse of George Washington. In her performances, she sat on display, addressing and interacting with spectators to confirm her authenticity. According to the advertisement that first announced her in August of 1835, she was “The Greatest Natural and National Curiosity in The World,” and when one visited her, one would find that she “retains her faculties in an unparalleled degree, converses freely, sings numerous hymns, relates many interesting anecdotes of the boy Washington and often laughs heartily at her own remarks, or those of the spectators” (qtd. in Wallace 4). The advertisement also stressed that she “is a Baptist and takes great pleasure in conversing with ministers and religious persons” (4). Above all, the ad proclaimed, the “appearance of this marvelous relic of antiquity strikes the beholder with amazement, and convinces him that his eyes are resting on the oldest specimen of mortality they ever before beheld. Original, authentic, and indisputable documents accompanying her prove,” the ad concluded, “however astonishing the fact may appear, that Joice Heth is in every respect the person she is represented” (4).

There is much to be gleaned from the performances of and connections between Heth and Barnum, the most significant for this volume being that both individuals were involved in their
Induction

respective ways in theatrical performances that operated within a poetics of deception that created, negotiated, maintained, and revealed secrets. For Barnum, this performance was the auspicious start to an auspicious career in chicanery and trickery. As James W. Cook has recently argued, even in this first foray into staging hoaxes Barnum already understood that the way to generate the most interest was to invite the possibility that the very thing he was passing off as authentic was inauthentic, so that in posing the two viewpoints simultaneously he generated even greater controversy (and ticket sales) than if he had simply defended Heth’s authenticity. In subsequent advertising, Barnum layered this controversy carefully—not only did he actually invite speculation as to whether Heth really was Washington’s nurse, he also introduced the possibility that she might not even be a real person at all but rather a cleverly constructed automaton, a stage magician’s machine designed to create a fabulous illusion. To arrive at the central secret of who Joice Heth was required penetrating multiple walls of the fortress of trickery Barnum built around her.

Where for Barnum Heth was a product to be exploited, this black woman’s own attitude about her involvement with the showman and her performance is unknown to history. As there is practically no known record of her perspective, one must speculate as to what her secrets were. It is tempting to see her as participating in the act as a way of empowering herself at a moment when black women’s mobility and economic opportunities were severely restricted. It is possible that she was playing the system in order to obtain status otherwise unattainable for her. Yet the fact is that she was to some extent Barnum’s property, purchased as an “act” from another white male performer.¹ Thus controlled and in a sense enslaved, she seems not to have achieved any real independence, especially in light of the fact that it was Barnum who evidently pocketed the revenue generated by the performance and who went on to fame and wealth. Whatever the case, Heth took the secrets of her own reasons for and goals in participating in the show to her grave, leaving an inscrutable narrative behind.

What emerges from the Heth-Barnum case is that both figures were tricksters, for it was revealed after Heth’s death (as if it were not already obvious) that she had not lived much past eighty years. Both were perpetrating a hoax, a fact that makes their interconnection highly difficult to read. In the sticky dynamics of their relationship, they apparently played off of one another as well as the public: one wonders what their conversations must have been like, for even as it is patently clear that Barnum was exploiting her, she was herself clearly performing a sophisticated and convincing role. It could be that their relationship exemplified a kind of Hegelian interdependence with Barnum realizing that he needed her in
order to make his fortune. She, meanwhile, was clearly limited in her economic mobilities and was thus to some degree compelled to participate in the performance. Both Heth and Barnum were embroiled—in voluntary as well as involuntary ways—in the highly complex, flexible, and multivalent thing that is secrecy.

The power of the web of secrecy is immense, and Heth and Barnum’s “relationship” is a theatrical example of the ways that both white and black people in the nineteenth century maneuvered or were maneuvered by, the need to keep things hidden about their lives, their identities, their pasts. Thomas Jefferson’s interracial relationship is now well known, and many such affairs of prominent white southern men who promoted sharp racial division have emerged since, while male slaveowners’ rape of black women has been much documented. While these relationships featured varied degrees of exploitation—perhaps it was possible that in some cases both parties willingly participated in them with something closer to equal amounts of affection—the dynamics of secrecy connected with them were pernicious and invariably put the parties involved in compromising positions. Moreover, these relationships say nothing of the other kinds of activities that both white and black people kept hidden during the nineteenth century, whether it was their involvement with the Underground Railroad or racial passing.

If the nineteenth century was characterized by such fraught matters of hiddenness and race, the twentieth was hardly different. If African Americans possessed greater mobility by the time of the Harlem Renaissance, passing remained a necessity in realizing a mobility as free as that of white people. If slavery was no more, segregation created spaces of division that were the essence of the principle of secrecy. Racist-driven persecution was carried out under the hooded cloak of the Ku Klux Klan, yet for a white person openly to defend interracial mixing of any kind could lead to social ostracism and even physical harm in many parts of the United States. Relationships of whatever kind between men and women of different races continued to be tortured, as writers as diverse as Richard Wright and Erskine Caldwell showed in *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Trouble in July*, respectively.

This book is about the ways in which people on both sides of the color line have been and are interpolated in and performing in secrecy by considering a body of work that is exemplary in its treatment of these matters. The body of work is a group of one-act plays written during the Harlem Renaissance by Marita Bonner, Mary P. Burrill, Thelma Duncan, Shirley Graham, Zora Neale Hurston, Georgia Douglas Johnson, May Miller, and Eulalie Spence. Their plays provide a fitting site for such an exploration
because they portray the intricate inner workings of secrecy, and they do so because the playwrights were themselves embroiled in secrecy as black women struggling to negotiate a white patriarchal-dominated society. For them secrecy was a part of their lives that they could also wield as a mode of social negotiation both in and beyond their writing of one-act plays.

The book will proceed in three phases. First, I will discuss the machinery of secrecy in the context of African American culture, paying particular attention to magic (both secular and religious) as the prime theatrical mode of performing a poetics of secrecy in an interracial context. In the second section, I will explore secrecy and magic in a selected group of the one-acts by these women, showing the interconnections among these works within the context of the multiply interpolated tapestry of secrecy of which they are a part. The volume's final section is labeled “Exeunt” to counterbalance this “Induction,” and in it I will ponder the book's implications and problems regarding the politics of performance in interracial interaction, primarily in the academy.

The final section and its aims are grandiose and tortured, the highly problematic conclusion to a highly problematic book. One problem with this volume is that the probing of secrets itself is a tenuous endeavor, a groping about for something that is by its nature elusive. This elusiveness leads to another problem, which is that once secrecy is introduced as a site of investigation, the avenues it touches proliferate rapidly and exponentially. For example, as one reads these one-acts and sees their similarities, one may not be able to help but wonder if these women together created a sort of in-group coding, producing a body of work intentionally designed to keep and reveal certain secrets. Yet the fact is that although these women knew each other, they did not form a formal writing group with any strict aesthetic principles or goals. Indeed, the very grouping of these women (who were not the only ones writing one-acts at the time) in this volume, which is really my own grouping, is arbitrary and even artificial. Or, at least it probably is—perhaps what history has no record of is that these women did secretly collaborate in inculcating their plays with shared imagery precisely to have it decoded by a scholar. Probably not.

And there is one other problem, a big one that I will address explicitly at the end of the book although I have already introduced it and will touch on it throughout. For now, let me conclude this induction by saying that my goal in this book is to bring these plays, which have been heretofore largely unknown (in a sense secret), greater attention from readers and scholars, and I hope that in the process secrecy will be more generally recognized as the fundamental aspect of social interaction that it is. At the same time, this book is designed to bring illusion into visibility, to fore-
ground the vexing threat of trickery and the final unresolvability of magic and the ways that such unresolvability touches everything from the writing of drama to the writing of literary criticism, especially in the context of the politics of interracial involvement, which at the time I am writing (during the 2008 presidential election year) are clearly of as crucial significance as ever in the United States. Ultimately, these one-acts offer a highly fecund site for a multitude of investigations, and this volume hopefully takes a step toward manifesting the entire dimensions of that site by modeling a way that these largely forgotten plays can speak to culture not only in their historical moment but in our own.²
Bonner, Burrill, Duncan, Graham, Hurston, Johnson, Miller, and Spence wrote about and themselves participated in black women’s negotiations of the hegemony of white men, white women, and even black men in the United States. They did so by drawing upon and generating techniques of secrecy through forms of both secular and religious magic. These techniques were necessary because the groups that stood in opposition to them to various degrees and in various ways themselves were embroiled in and operated through and within secrecy. In order to understand how these black women writers worked in this mode, it is necessary to articulate the specifics of secrecy and magic in their lives and the ways that from their perspective these other groups as well as they themselves were interpolated in a widespread web of secrecy.

That secrecy has been central to African American performance has been noted by numerous scholars. During the era of slavery, secret tactics were utilized in multiple ways. Frederick Douglass explains that slaves would “universally say they are contented, and that their masters are kind” when asked about such things by white people (even strangers) because the “slaveholders have been known to send in spies among their slaves, to ascertain their views and feelings in regard to their condition,” creating the slave maxim “that a still tongue makes a wise head” (Narrative 62). Additionally, as
Albert J. Raboteau has explained, slaves met in “hush harbors” to practice their own forms of religion in secret, while passing was a distinctly theatrical way for light-skinned African Americans to keep secret their race in order to enter white spaces and participate to some degree in the privilege found there.\(^2\) In a more subtle vein, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. has famously argued, games of Signifyin[g] permitted (and has since permitted) African Americans to speak in coded ways to protect their secrets while providing a deceptive text for white outsiders. Such coding also characterized slave spirituals, which were crucial to African American survival, as Eileen Southern has argued.

As slavery drew to an end and the Jim Crow era began, additional forms of secrecy developed. The Underground Railroad had been a mode of secret escape, and now Black Masons and other secret societies provided protective and empowering spaces, a form of segregation that was community-confirming as opposed to the oppressive segregation developing primarily in the southern states.\(^3\) This time period also saw more black people donning minstrel masks, which could be a move designed to counteract white-defined notions of essentialized blackness.\(^4\) Houston A. Baker Jr. (in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*) as well as Gates (in *Figures in Black*) have shown the subversive capabilities of such appropriations of masks, with Baker taking things a step further by identifying a “phaneric” as well as a “cryptic” mask; where the latter was essentially a minstrel mask worn by Booker T. Washington and others, the former was worn by W. E. B. Du Bois and was “meant to advertise. It distinguishes rather than conceals. It secures territorial advantage and heightens a group’s survival possibilities” (51).

These techniques of protecting secrets depended on and operated within the multiply interpolated machinery of secrecy. Although not often theorized or evoked in literary criticism, secrecy is fundamental to social negotiation, identity formation, and even writing itself.\(^5\) It can incarnate as a space, a function, a condition, a situation, or a strategy. Most important, theorizing secrecy is necessary to understand the resplendent complexity of African American performance and its functions in responding to white oppression and its own secrets, and to deepening our grasp of those secrecy tactics already mentioned and exposing additional ones as written about by the black women whose work is this volume’s focus.

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Sissela Bok, in her voluminous *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*, perhaps best explains the fluid nature of secrecy as a mode of
social negotiation. She begins her exploration by discussing the signifiers that denote secrecy in various languages, citing the Latin words *secretum* and *arcanum*, which signify the ideas of “something hidden, set apart” and “the daunting and the fascinating, dread and allure” (6), respectively. From the frightening she turns to the warm and cozy, noting that the German word *heimlich* originally signified “the home, the hearth, the intimate; later, it took on the added meaning of something kept from the view of strangers and finally also of all that is secret” (7). Meanwhile, the Swedish word *lönn* refers to “lying, denial, and every form of deceit” (7). The overtones of these various words are subtle, and while, after discussing several additional ones, Bok sums up by suggesting that “the hidden is part of the meaning of all” of them, she also acknowledges that “the different shadings of each one—whether of something sacred, intimate, private, unspoken, silent, prohibited, shameful, stealthy, or deceitful—come together in our understanding of the meanings of the secret and of secrecy” (7). She also notes that “[w]e cannot encompass all these meanings in a single definition; for while they form a family of related meanings, they are not always present together in any one instance of secrecy” (7). Actually, just how tight-knit that “family of related meanings” is itself looms as a large question, as Bok proceeds to develop an intriguing discussion of secrecy that traces the various situations in which it is used, from espionage to secret societies.

For Bok, secrecy is an ethical necessity for individual or group autonomy but its use must be a measured balance of hiddenness and unhiddenness. In order to maintain the privacy essential to individuality, one must have the freedom to have one’s secrets. Secrets, in this sense, are thus implicitly figured as property, a vital aspect of the concept of private ownership, illustrated by the fact that secret information can be purchased. Yet, at the same time that secrecy is necessary and too much openness threatens individual or even group rights, too much secrecy can be both intentionally and unintentionally harmful. For instance, withholding important health information can protect an individual’s privacy regarding her having a sexually transmitted disease, but if she keeps that information secret she violates a partner’s rights to information and she can physically harm that person. In the ethics of concealment and revelation, there must be a constant search for the most proper and/or effective possible balance of hiddenness.

It is in the regulation of what can be an uneasy balancing act that the true complexities of secrecy emerge; part of this complexity is due to the paradoxical machinery of hiddenness itself. Malcolm Bull describes this subtlety, exploring what he calls the “coming into hiddenness” that accompanies a thing’s very existence, its very coming into visibility. He argues that things feature an “inescapable hiddenness” that is the simultaneous other side of
what is unhidden, so that the one is constituted by the other in perception even though the hidden aspect or aspects can never be perceived simultaneously with the unhidden. He takes, for example, the word *port*: in a certain context it “means the place where ships dock” and “even though the inscription itself is right in front of you it will not even suggest a fortified wine, and nothing of its other meaning(s) will be perceived” (25). “However,” he explains, “provided that you are conversant with both meanings of the word, there is no reason why, in an appropriate context, you should not alternate between the two” (25). It is the impossibility of simultaneity of perception that constitutes hiddenness and causes secrecy to emerge as a fundamental part of constituting a thing. The perceiver may even be aware of the other sides of things, but is limited by perception. Thus Wittgenstein’s rabbit and duck can only ever be a rabbit or a duck in a single act of perception even if the perceiver is aware of both readings of the image. Indeed, as Bull points out, nothing could be more unhidden than Poe’s purloined letter, which is so effectively concealed in plain sight.

Because of the machinery of perception, therefore, things are inscribed within a necessary secrecy, and this principle includes people and the processes of identity-formation. Bull cites Walt Whitman’s evocation of multiple selves in “Song of Myself” to show that each recognition of a self highlights a self not previously seen. Identity itself is a coming into hiddenness as the other perceives one aspect of the multilayered thing that is the self. In this economy of seeing (Bull stresses that hiddenness is inextricably bound to sight, even when connected with other senses), the subject-forming in the mirror stage itself alienates certain constitutions of the self in the recognition of and by the other so that not only does the perceiving other split the self into hiddenness and unhiddenness in that other’s perception, but presumably nonperceived parts of the self become hidden even to the perceiving self. The subject herself is thus vexed by the hidden, and it is precisely this fear of the secret self that Leslie Fiedler argues is the dreadful fascination and repulsion of the “freak.” The self is thus interpolated in secrecy, both externally (from the perceiving other) and internally (in the sense of the self as externally constructed).

The ineluctable presence of secrecy within perception and its role in identity formation is especially helpful in considering the multiply interpolated role of perception in African American identity. Du Bois’s Veil is dense with the aura of secrecy. It is a divider, something that stands between, keeps separate, and hides, but as a figure it also signals the nuances of perception. In the Hegelian-influenced dynamic of this figure in black identity, the white denial of recognition is a form of secreting, hiding, making opaque. At the same time, as Fanon would later argue, life within the Veil would at certain points
in history make a number of black people's own cultures and concerns secret even to themselves, denied as they could be of self-consciousness and continually groping for white consciousness and experience. Moreover, Du Bois assigns to the Veil specific folk cultural elements of perception by casting it as the caul which gives its wearer the gift of second sight, the ability literally to see things which are hidden but nonetheless present—ghosts invisibly haunting consciousness.

This presentness of the hidden is significant, for not only is the self formed in perception, but that very perceiving self grows out of a state of secrecy that remains immanent even as it is invisible. Resurrecting the *chora* (receptacle) from Plato's *Timaeus*, Julia Kristeva identifies it as the realm of the primal semiotic. An “essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases” (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 25), the *chora* is the deeply articulated space of the drives that is presymbolic, which is to say that it is unregulated by and not translated into the order, which is itself patriarchal. Kristeva addresses language as representative of this symbolic order, a “logical” system of signification. Unlike the symbolic, the semiotic expresses differently, responding organically to deep bodily inflections. Thus the “*chora* is a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic” (26). It is rather the realm of “concrete operations” which “precede the acquisition of language, and organize preverbal semiotic space according to logical categories, which are thereby shown to precede or transcend language” (27). The *chora* therefore is “a preverbal functional state that governs the connections between the body (in the process of constituting itself as body proper), objects, and the protagonists of family structure,” a functioning different from the “symbolic operations that depend on language as a sign system—whether the language [*langue*] is vocalized or gestural (as with deaf-mutes)” (27). Because it precedes and transcends the symbolic order, the *chora* is even more “unknown” than the unconscious, which is the space of repressed memories that were at least once known and can return to consciousness. As Kristeva writes, the semiotic

is not, therefore, cognitive in the sense of being assumed by a knowing, already constituted subject. The genesis of the functions organizing the semiotic process can be accurately elucidated only within a theory of the subject that does not reduce the subject to one of understanding, but instead opens up within the subject this other scene of presymbolic functions. (27)

I am reading the *chora* as the somatic-psychic space of secrecy in which the multivalent self (a proliferation of selves) is ensconced. The *chora* is the
ultimate secret self, the soft body encased in the carapace of consciousness, the supreme testimony to the fact that the subject is always already ensconced and interpolated in secrecy. Beyond perception of the self by either the other or the self, secrecy is thus a fundamental aspect of being-in-the-world (to continue this shift from the Husserlian to the Heideggerian) and is inextricably linked to identity formation not only in terms of perception but even in the very miasmic churnings that spew forth the multivalent subject. This inaccessible and invisible space’s immanence haunts consciousness, being part of what insulates the individual as individual, because its unpredictable and inscrutable nature is the indispensable secret core of autonomy.

This space of secrecy, deeply embedded within the subject (or perhaps it is the secret ocean upon which the self floats—the source of the “oceanic” that so obsesses Freud in Civilization and Its Discontents) as a kind of ghost space immanent but necessarily unknown—might be thought of as a figure applicable in a large sense to the color line itself and to black people as a body. The white Western imagination has considered African Americans as unknown in the same sense as the chora is, and white stereotypes have throughout history cast black people as animalistic, spinal, earthly, and characterized by excessive corporeality and sexuality—in short, as denizens of libidinal drives. There is an inherent mystery in stereotypes of the descendants of the “Dark Continent.” Moving to the other side of this double interpolation, African Americans have at times bolstered this mystery for their own protection and empowerment. Kristeva observes that the moment when a concept, emotion, or reaction originating in the chora is spoken, it has entered the symbolic order and is no longer semiotic, the chora erupting instead in nonsymbolic ways and thus in its persistent unknowableness refuses to signify, at least and again, within the economy of the symbolic. Certain forms of Signifyin(g) can be seen as this kind of semiotic breach in the symbolic.

Because the chora erupts as an inscrutable presence, presenting itself as the unknowable, it makes the interesting move of making that unknowability known precisely as unknowability—a revelation of the fact of hiddenness. To evoke the cliché that the only thing to fear is fear itself is to observe that one must create the awareness of the existence of fear in order for fear to be generated. Likewise, it is with the awareness of the fact that something is hidden that a secret is born as a player in social interaction. In what might seem a surprising reversal, secrecy may as readily be seen as a participant in the visible and accessible as it is the invisible and inaccessible. Whether in terms of the dynamics of seeing or in the unknowableness of the chora, secrecy registers a poetic of presence rather than absence. It marks a point on a scale of hiddenness and unhiddenness, visibility and invisibility, the known and
the unknown. This marked point is that of balance within a given situation, and it is important to remember that what is seeable is just as crucial in this balance as what is not.

Where secrecy as a process marks this point of balance, the secret as an item is the concretization of that process—the marker itself. A secret is, in a sense, itself a type of receptacle, a kind of cardboard box marked not with the words “dishes” or “boxes” or even “fragile” or “handle with care,” but rather simply “unknown,” announcing itself precisely as a species of interaction, communication, and expression that signifies as resisting revelation despite the fact that the revelation of its very existence is a revelation. To say “I have a secret” is to say that “I have something to say but am not saying it,” thus striking a pose within a dialectic of avowal and disavowal.

The secret as an item of social exchange can in fact be seen as fetishistic. Signifying the aura of the unknown, metonymically standing in for all figures of unknowableness, a secret as such can generate and/or contain a complex of desires by the very fact that it is pregnant with inaccessible content made conspicuous by its very inaccessibility. Claiming to possess a secret creates conspicuousness—hence the appeal of a “mysterious” person or situation. It is this sort of fetishistic dynamic that D. A. Miller evidently has in mind when venturing that “I have had to intimate my secret, if only not to tell it and conversely, in theatrically continuing to keep my secret, I have already given it away” (194). Barthes makes a similar point in regard to the “ultimate triangle” of the stripper’s G-string, which is “the irrefutable symbol of the absolute object” that is a part of the nakedness that is itself the “natural vesture of woman, which amounts in the end to regaining a perfectly chaste state of the flesh” (85) in what is, for Barthes, a performance that brings about a supreme coming into hiddenness. In the radical division between secrets as details kept hidden and the secret as a type of communicative object, the latter functions as a visible and well-known figure with a specific mode of referentiality, and this dynamic can be seen at work, for example, in the sort of minstrel and phaneric masking that Baker identifies in Washington’s and Du Bois’s rhetoric, respectively.7

Not to say that this dialectic of concealment and revelation is always or ever entirely intentional. There is validity to Miller’s assertion that “secrecy would seem to be a mode whose ultimate meaning lies in the subject’s formal insistence that he is radically inaccessible to the culture that would otherwise entirely determine him” (195). But, as I observed earlier, the multivalent subject is presumably no more capable of perceiving her own hiddenness than is the perceiving other. Additionally, the chora is incapable of articulation within the symbolic, and even the unconscious is a space and function of secrecy that operates in ways that escape and compromise intention. Fur-
thermore, the act of secreting responds to complex situations that are themselves inflected with secrecy, as Luise White observes that keeping a “secret isn’t something a self does, it’s something that continually has to be reconstituted and renegotiated through changing political and discursive practices” (22). Because subtle and varied forces surround, affect, and contain the multivalent subject, subtle and varied responses to those forces are required. The subject is therefore interpolated in secrecy not only within perception and that subject’s somatic-psychic makeup but also within situation.8

Some attention should therefore be given to secrecy in and as situation. Stanton K. Tefft well defines the situational incarnations of secrecy through his application of conflict theory. He writes that “[c]onflicts of interest between individuals and groups over values, prestige, power, wealth, control of resources, or political goals initiate processes of social interaction which include information control (secrecy)” (“Secrecy, Disclosure, and Social Theory” 63). This situational model is, for Tefft, one that is largely based on the participants’ conscious intentions, although it is intriguing to consider the role of the unconscious in utilizing this “social resource which opponents can use defensively or offensively during social conflicts” (63). The particular directions of this offensive-defensive maneuvering vary in their goals depending on whether groups oppose other groups, individuals oppose those of the out-group, or individuals oppose others in their in-group. As Tefft argues, the “actions and reactions of individuals, organizations, and political communities to each other depends not only [on] how they perceive these to be threatened by outsiders” for “[i]ndividuals and the organizations to which they belong determine the rewards or costs of secrecy or disclosure in terms of their own self-interest as the conflict with outsiders intensifies or dissipates” (63). Thus whatever “the structural sources of conflict, and they may be many and varied, secrecy plays a role in conflict-group formation and the dynamics of conflict itself” so that the “more intense the conflict the greater the efforts to conceal information from antagonists” while the conflict “also leads to in-group cohesion by setting group boundaries and strengthening group cohesiveness. Often secrecy norms help maintain such social boundaries and contribute to group cohesiveness” (51).

However intentional this “information control” may be, again, secrecy takes on a situational life of its own. Secrets begin to be used to counteract other secrets, as “[a]ntagonists who keep secrets from one another, must employ security devices to protect such secrets” (63). This interaction is influenced by factors far beyond individual control, since the “nature as well as the effectiveness of such security systems are determined by social structural, cultural, economic, ecological, and political factors” (63). What seems evident is that secrecy is constituted as a discursive form, a mode of dis-
course that, like language itself, is externally and socially constructed. To ply secrets is to participate in an overarching framework of discursivity. This is not to say that secrets cannot be connected to or based in material, but rather that the various forces within situations of secrecy are mediated by discursive measures of secreting. Even hiding material evidence is accompanied by discursive strategy (if only implicitly and covertly) and is ensconced in a discursive context that makes that secreting meaningful.

Tefft’s nomenclature signals the game aspects of this situation, and one might think of such situations as games of what could be labeled “secrecy-discourse.” Game theory, in its most basic sense, provides a helpful way of thinking such situations because it provides explanations and vocabulary to make sense of them: players in game situations enact certain strategic moves in order to achieve their desired payoffs. Game play is dictated by the necessity of achieving a situational equilibrium that posits levels and types of payoffs, and this balancing is, as has been noted, crucial to secreting. Moreover the applicability of game theory to the dynamics of secrecy is well reflected in the gaming aspect of African American Signifyin(g), passing, and the kinds of masking that have already been mentioned.

Games of secrecy-discourse are necessarily inscribed within specific cultural situations, making them difficult to describe in a general way; nevertheless, certain principles of secrecy-discourse game situations can be discerned. Specifically, such situations are played out by means of certain “secrecy-moves.” These moves may take one or more of the following forms: silence, lying, and coding. The shadings of difference among these types of moves are slight, and one can often enact the function of others. But each features a distinct type of principle. Silence, for instance, does not necessarily deceive but can nevertheless be a form of lying. By lying, I mean a performance of signs deliberately designed to deceive an opponent; as Bok writes, a lie is “any intentionally deceptive message which is stated, but can of course also be conveyed” as she drolly puts it, “via smoke signals, Morse Code, sign language, and the like” (Lying 13). What I am not including in lying (although it can be a form of lying) is a form of signage that uses double-signification intelligible to an ally but unintelligible to the enemy. Such double-signifying is coding, and coding operates in especially subtle ways interconnected with in-group/out-group dynamics.

In addition to these general principles of secrecy-moves, it should be noted that, perhaps in accord with its Hegelian aspect, secrecy is often connected with situations of social inequity. While it can certainly be the case that people of equal social status, gender, race, and so on can come into conflict that requires information control, it is usually the case that, as Tefft notes, secrecy “enables the powerful to escape accountability for their exploi-
tation and manipulation of the weak and enables the weak to escape coercion by the powerful and to oppose them” (76). Carol Warren and Barbara Laslett address this difference between the secrets of the empowered and those of the unempowered. The former they refer to as “public-life secrets,” which they define as “secrecy on the part of those in power and their agents, acting purportedly in the public interest” (29). These secrets are those of empowered institutions, and Warren and Laslett identify their agents as including “FBI and CIA officers, plainclothes police officers, and government bureaucrats of various types. They may also include human behavior researchers and journalists” (29). Governmental investigations are top secret because they have to be: FBI agents, CIA officers, journalists, and so on “are secretive by virtue of their political role” for the “ideological justification of public-life secrecy is the seeking out and elimination of ‘undesirable elements’ in society—elements that might threaten the control of the powerful” (29). Thus, Warren and Laslett provocatively add, “the object of public-life secrecy is the discovery of how the ostensibly private roles of others are in fact relevant to public life” (29). Public-life secrets are precisely the sorts of government-affirming secrets that Socrates believed are necessary for the establishment of a republic, and in a moment when racial and ethnic profiling have entered into official and unofficial policies of US governmental institutions and officers (and have especially touched African Americans), it is easy to see their function.12

Opposed to public-life secrets are “private-life secrets.” This term refers to “secrecy about one’s personal life rather than to secrecy in relation to political roles of other persons” and in action it “is the concealment of attributes, actions, or relationships that, if discovered, might bring harm to the individuals or groups engaged in them” (29). Warren and Laslett explain that this form of secrecy’s “justification is less an independent ideological one than a response to ideology: a desire to avert the full wrath of whatever powerful groups are in control of the definition of ‘undesirable elements’” (29). Moreover, where public-life secrets are “active and directed at the lives of others,” private-life secrets are “passive and protective of the self” (30) and “would most likely be [used] where persons are morally stigmatized or where they have inadequate financial or other resources to provide themselves with privacy” (31). Although these private-life secrets would seem to apply to African Americans, Warren and Laslett do not consider race as a factor in secrecy, yet their assigning this kind of secrecy to the “morally stigmatized” and financially inadequate is revealing. They conclude that they “expect that secrecy would be utilized more by lower than higher status persons, by children and the institutionalized elderly rather than adults, by the mentally and physically ill more than the healthy, and by the morally stigmatized more
than the ‘normal’” (31). Of course they would, for “normal” signifies conformity, voluntarily and/or coincidentally, to dominant ideology, which seeks to weed out nonconformity under the rapacious cloak of public-life secrecy.

Along with these game situation-defined functions of secrecy, the actual content-types of secrets dictate their value and role in social exchange. Robert E. Regan identifies three types of secrets: first, there is the natural secret, so called because “the obligation of secrecy which it imposes arises directly from the natural law; no contract, expressed or implied, is needed to make it binding” (5). The second is the promised secret, designated by the fact that “the obligation of maintaining secrecy is begotten by a promise given and accepted” (6). Third in the list is the entrusted (also referred to as a committed) secret “whose obligation arises from an agreement, given and received antecedently to any disclosure, that the secret matter will be rigorously guarded” (7). Regan observes that these types of secrets possess an “obliging force” resulting from “the specific malice involved in their violation” (20); the “moral obligation of guarding a natural secret is, in general, a serious one” while that of “guarding a merely promised secret is, generally, a slight one . . . due to the fact that a merely promised secret binds according to the intention of the one promising” except in the case of “a serious obligation in justice” or when a promised secret is also a natural one (20–21). The moral obligation of an entrusted secret is “a serious one, and generally more serious than that attaching to the natural or merely promised secret” (21).

The varying degrees of moral and ethical weight attached to natural, promised, and entrusted secrets are affected if not determined by the culturally specific circumscriptions of secrecy-discourse game situations within which ethical distinctions emerge, and these situations are generally not monolithic but rather are sites of overlapping situations each with its own ethical hierarchy. Not only do multiple players adopt multiple strategies, they are also playing in multiple games simultaneously and the different game situations they encounter can be tinged by the other game situations in which they are operating. This intersecting is another reason why multiple players or groups of players are interpolated in secrecy, for in the unhiddenness of playing one game, other games become hidden but no less related or present.

This situational intersection can be found painfully enacted in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s encounter with a Nambikwara village in *Tristes Tropiques*. Lévi-Strauss relates the way that he tricks a group of girls into telling him the names of the people in the tribe—which was information the tribe had been keeping secret apparently to maintain a protective space from the anthropologist, although Lévi-Strauss simply asserts that “the use of proper names was taboo” (335). Lévi-Strauss explains that upon one occasion when he is
playing with the children of the village, one of the little girls hits another
one, and the assaulted girl goes to him “to confide what seemed to be solemn
secret” (336), which turns out to be the girl’s name. “From then on,” Lévi-
Strauss writes, “it was very easy, although rather unscrupulous, to incite the
children against each other and get to know all their names. After which,
having created a certain atmosphere of complicity, I had little difficulty in
getting them to tell me the names of the adults” (336). This account mani-
fests multiple games of secrecy-discourse. Lévi-Strauss as the white Euro-
pean anthropologist is an emissary of public-life secrecy, an upholder of
Western dominant ideology, who plays a game of learning about (and argu-
ably colonizing) another culture with that learning (colonizing) being his
payoff. The Nambikwarans may or may not be fully aware of the nature of
his game, but whether they are or not he is frustrated in his game by the fact
that the Nambikwarans keep their names hidden (he has even begun to give
them names of his own making to distinguish them). In the meantime, the
girls have their own literal unnamed game, and when one of them loses, she
quits playing it and begins her own game in which she gives away a natural
(and possibly entrusted) private life secret, which in turn leads Lévi-Strauss
to establish a new coercive game.

Intersecting games situations thus generate additional ones as secrecy-
moves and countermoves proliferate, and these new secrecy-discourse
games can be created in a couple of ways. In the case of the Nambikwara
girl, when she leaves her own game and starts a new one she is behaving as
what Johan Huizinga calls a “spoil-sport.” This figure “is not the same as the
false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on
the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle” of the game (30). A spoil-
sport tends to receive harsh retribution from the other players (and indeed
the girl is heavily chastised for her behavior by the other Nambikwarans)
because such a figure “shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from
the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he
had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its illusion” (30).
Such a Bartleby-esque figure “must be cast out, for he threatens the existence
of the play-community. . . . The spoil-sport breaks the magic world, there-
fore he is a coward and must be ejected” (30). Huizinga goes on to note that
sometimes “spoil-sports in their turn make a new community with rules of
its own. The outlaw, the revolutionary, the cabbalist or member of a secret
society, indeed heretics of all kinds are of a highly associative if not sociable
disposition, and a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings”
(30).

A new secrecy-discourse game can be established also when a player
actually plays to lose. Such a tactic, according to Michael Beaujour, implies
a victory on some other level. . . . The desire to play a game in reverse [to lose] usually arises when the straight way of playing has become a bore, or when the usual kind of victory appears self-defeating. The rules of the game which, although arbitrary, had somewhere become “natural” to the players, now seem “artificial,” tyrannical and dead: the system does not allow for sufficient play or freedom within it, and must be discarded. (62)

The important thing to note is that such “discarding” in a certain game field means migrating to another field, which operates on the very same rules, however different the situation may be, for “only a system can replace a system . . . it is but the moment of a ‘new deal’” (62). Beaujour adds the observation that “playing a serious game in order to lose is a very sophisticated behavior” and it “will be felt to be a return to nature and to whatever is fundamental, universal and spontaneous in man. This is merely the illusion attendant on the break-down of old rules, when the new ones are not yet formulated” (62).

The briar-patch quality of these strategies for deconstructing oppressive secrecy-discourse game situations are clearly discernable in the recognized African American secrecy-discourse moves that have already been noted. The silence tactics of slaves mentioned by Douglass and Raboteau and the interpretation-based coding Baker and Gates recognize are secrecy-moves, with Du Bois’s form of masking arguably being a form of rule breaking that realigns racial performance that powerfully paves the way for the artistic and cultural blossoming that was the Harlem Renaissance. What the foregoing discussion of the game aspect of secrecy hopefully helps further do is accentuate the reciprocally constitutive nature of secrecy, its dialectic functioning within which multiple players, both white and black, male and female, are interpolated. P. T. Barnum, it should now be evident, was an agent and purveyor of public-life secrecy, for the core of his hoax confirmed white racism, however much he may have encouraged other forms of debate. The problematic thing about his rhetoric is that he was negotiating two different in-groups—that of other whites in the United States but also the one he at least tacitly formed with Heth, which was further complicated by his own individual goals. Heth herself remains inscrutable: complicitous with Barnum to some degree, she aided in his promulgation of public-life secrecy, managing a skillful game of outright lying in order to negotiate a hegemonic but also, to some degree, vulnerable white out-group in the process of what might be seen as a heroic playing of white expectations were it not for the fact that she seems to have been regretfully cut off from her own in-group. By simply making a living within interconnecting spheres of secrecy she appears to have ended up in a final sad isolation, buried in ultimate secrecy.
In order fully to parse secrecy and the ways that multiple groups and individuals are interpolated in and wielding it in interracial interaction in the United States, it must be understood how secrecy is also theatrical and how that theatricality incarnates in the form of magic which itself is multivalent and complexly interpolated. I have already hinted at the reciprocities between secrecy and theater. The space of secrecy-discourse is a theatrical space as well as a game-space, and Tefft acknowledges that just as conflict theory may be used to describe the social functions of secrecy, so can the “dramaturgical model” be applied, which sees “the social world [as] structured in terms of the interactions of individuals, scripts, other players (team members) and various audiences” (40–41). African American culture has been tinged by both formal theater and theatrum mundi from its origins, for Carol Allen notes that “the slave auction and the plantation fashion a ‘show business’ of sorts” (1), and alongside this theater of cruelty (and not the liberating and positive revolutionary kind Antonin Artaud envisioned) emerged minstrelsy, in which black bodies serving as fetishes turned performance into a tour de force. I have already mentioned the theatricality of passing and black minstrelsy as an obvious subversion of a theatrical tradition just as much as it is a form of game play. But a deeper look into theatricality and its spatial overtones helps expose additional aspects of secrecy in African American experience and performance.

I should first note why I evoke “theatricality” instead of, or at least along with, “performance” as a concept for discussing secrecy. Both concepts make unhidden the fact that “playing” is also performing (actors as players/gamers as players), that the “seeing” of selves outlined earlier is the other side of “performance” of selves, and that game moves are the same things as performance “strategies” discussed by such theorists as Bourdieu and Certeau. The matter of performance in the context of theater, however, grows particularly attenuated, for the term then takes on, if possible, an ever greater opacity. Indeed, I want to focus on theatricality not only because this volume ultimately focuses on playwrights, but because theatricality necessitates more concrete structures of display and makes imperative the act and manipulation of seeing in ways that performance does not necessarily do. Theater scholars have eyed “performance theory” as it is appropriated by multiple disciplines with some doubt, with Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis wryly observing that the idea of performance, certainly, is a compelling explanatory construct. Its many facets are exciting for those to whom, apparently, this is a new idea.
But the desire to characterize performance as a comprehensive idea, even a system, has often been done not only in ignorance of the complicated history of the concept but also in disregard for its capacity to be imprecise. (33–34)

Performance cannot be abandoned as foundational in examining subjectivity and social interaction, but thinking in terms of theatricality allows for thinking through the connections between theater proper and the world.15

Theatricality in the context of conscious performance refers to all aspects of drama beyond and including the written text. As Bernard Beckerman observes in Dynamics of Drama, the written script of a play “is a mere skeleton; performance fleshes out the bones. Reading an ‘unfinished’ play script depends upon the governing vision of one’s spectacles” (3). In theater’s poetics of “occurring,” what “happens” is what “finishes” the play. “Activity is the basic medium of theater,” Beckerman explains. “It is the only channel through which presentational ideas can be projected and so the art of the theater is the art of manipulating activity” (13). Theater, however, includes more than just performance. As Ric Knowles observes in developing his theory of what he calls “material semiotics” of theater, the phenomenon of theater includes the performance text, the conditions of the production, and the conditions of reception. Knowles points out that “each pole of this triangle is constituted by multiple and multiply encoded systems of production, systems of communication, and systems of reception, all working in concert or tension both within their own ‘corner,’ and along the axes that hold the poles together and in tension with one another” (19).16 It is this attention to factors such as the structures of space, situational variables, and audience makeup that make theatricality a more useful concept than performance because such elements take into account the architecture and machinery, whether material or not, that undergird performativity.

Theater/theatricality has historically carried its own issues of secrecy, often with negative connotations. Theater throws into relief the problems of artifice and mimesis that have drawn the ire of thinkers from Plato to Nietzsche because it raises the same sorts of vexed issues of subjectivity with which postmodernism, most recently, has grappled. But it does so by creating yet another level of performance (i.e., performing selves performing), a situation that creates a plane of Baudrillardian precession of simulacra that might, such thinkers have feared, merely point to another lying beneath it. The sort of coming into hiddenness that Bull describes thus transfers to the stage and its setting, the actors and the audience, all of which appear and perform not only in their already established multivalence as selves but also in their roles as prescribed by the given theatrical moment. Some forms of theater actually keep themselves secret, an example being Augusto Baol’s
“Invisible Theater,” in which the actors perform in an informal public setting such as a restaurant without revealing that they are in fact actors and that their activities are part of a preestablished script, even though surrounding “non-actors” are being drawn into the performance and themselves turned into actors as well as spectators.

This matter of visibility is especially trenchant when considering secrecy and theater. As Joseph Roach points out, the word “theater” derives “from the Greek word for seeing and sight” (46), and while he goes on to champion performance as a more expansive and useful concept, it is worth considering the matter of seeing and its attendant issues of visibility and invisibility and their connections with secrecy as a product of seeing. Seeing, or to adopt a more utilized term the gaze, signals a theatricality that registers constitutive forces of power as described by Hegel, Lacan, Fanon, and others. In Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, Foucault traces the theatricality of the public spectacle and its subsequent movement into a very different form of invisibility. “The theatre of punishment of which the eighteenth century dreamed and which would have acted essentially on the minds of the general public,” Foucault writes, “was replaced by the great uniform machinery of prisons” which in the nineteenth century were characterized by the “high wall, no longer the wall that surrounds and protects, no longer the wall that stands for power and wealth, but the meticulously sealed wall, uncrossable in either direction, closed in upon the now mysterious work of punishment” (116). Within those walls—inside the secret of the prisons—a new visibility prevailed, exemplified in the Panopticon, which was itself designed “to induce in the inmate the conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (21) in which two aspects worked together to establish and maintain power: “Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so” (201).

In fact, a highly visible and multiply interpolated spectacle drenched with secrecy in an African American context is that of lynching. Kirk W. Fuoss discusses lynching as theater, and this display of black bodies represents a spectacle in which, according to Trudier Harris, whites exorcised their fear of the “Black Beast” stereotype. It is also the case that lynching was touched by secrecy in multiple ways; when the Ku Klux Klan was doing the lynching, the event was obviously being perpetrated by masked members of a secret society, but Jacqueline Goldsby has recently argued that a much wider and insidious secrecy surrounded lynching, for it was not simply an epidemic of the racist US South but rather of a nationwide “cultural logic.” She explains that lynching
made certain cultural developments and tensions visible for Americans to
confront. On the other hand, because lynching’s violence was so unspeakably 
brutal—and crucially, since the lives and bodies of African American
people were negligible concerns for the country for so long a time—cultural
logic also describes how we have disavowed lynching’s normative relation
to modernism’s history over the last century. Hence, I speak of lynching’s
“secrecy” as an historical event. (6)

Spatiality is central to these theatrical aspects of secrecy, particularly the
fluidity of spatial divides. The visibility of theaters of punishment is manipu-
lated by changing the spaces of these theaters. What Foucault so effectively
shows are the ways secret spaces are pragmatically made to signify just as
the secret as an item can signify as an object of social negotiation. For Fou-
cault, the high wall itself emerges as a spotlight curtain, the V/veil itself being
foregrounded for its secreting function. Yet, again, secrecy and theatrical
space can be much more immediately fluid, as is the case in Baol’s theater
which has no material curtain at all nor even any spatial divide between the
actors and the audience, as all present are enlisted as players as well as spec-
tators. Even in conventional formal theater, space and visibility are fluid; at
the same time that offstage and hidden sounds and “events” accommodate
the rigid dimensions of a stage, dramatic irony results from an audience’s
“seeing” what a given character cannot.

The technique par excellence of manipulating visibility in fluid theat-
trical spaces is magic. Explaining the necessity of “activities” in “finishing”
the written aspect of the play, Beckerman identifies three different kinds
of activities: natural, artificial, and virtual. Natural activities include those
that imitate real-life actions. Artificial activities are “made by human skill”
and include such skills as “juggling, tap dancing, acrobatics, that are so dis-
tinctive in character and so specialized in form that they cannot be recog-
nized as stemming from familiar patterns of behavior. They exist wholly for
the purpose of presentation as activities devised and practiced by men to
astonish and delight others” (14). Virtual activities, however, involve illusory
acts, or acts of “magic” that differ from artificial activities in that the person
performing virtual activities “does one thing while trying to create the illu-
sion that he is doing another” while the one performing artificial activities
“is actually doing what he appears to be doing” (16). The actor performing
magic thus creates in the very space of visibility an invisibility, and the stage
magician’s expertise lies in his or her ability to make the visible invisible
through sleight of hand.

This creation of secrecy within an overarching openness amounts to
what Barbara Maria Stafford calls the “visible invisible.” Exploring forms of
Enlightenment-era entertainment, Stafford discusses the dialectic of rationality and irrationality at work among the devices of prestidigitators and other creators of illusion. The term visible invisible signifies the balancing of revelation and concealment but does so in the specific context of stage magic and the particular ethics of that particular theatricality. Drawing on the reciprocities between game play and theater, Stafford observes that on “one hand, the invisible or concealed imposition of artificial patterns could change the world into a toy and the players into tools of the hidden juggler,” the effect of which was to make objects “appear to exist ‘objectively,’ as if emitted ‘naturally’ or automatically,” while on “the other hand, the illusionists could make instrumentality visible by informing the viewer of the tactics used in the performance” (129–30). This sort of avowal-disavowal is exactly the kind of technique that Barnum used to promulgate the Heth hoax. What is particularly subtle in such sleight of hand is that “the performer created the illusion of eyewitnessing without informing the beholder how the action was done” (79). This sort of illusion of witnessing is a kind of false seeing resulting from a manipulation of perception, and it is this maneuvering that constitutes “the visible invisible [which during the Enlightenment could have] . . . the technologist . . . condemned as a cheap trickster and his product judged as sophisticated flimflam. The total experience added up to commodified wonder selling base stupefaction” (79).

This sort of stage magic visible invisible appears in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man. Explaining what he means when he refers to himself as being invisible, the novel’s narrator states:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (3)

The “bodiless heads” illusion Ellison refers to is one that usually features a table with a box on top of it that contains a head that addresses the people who file by—the illusion is achieved by having the person playing the role of the talking head sit beneath the table with his or her head thrust through a hole in the table and the bottom of the box on top of the table. Mirrors are placed in between the table’s legs and the lighting is adjusted so that it seems that there is no body under the table. When constructed correctly, the
spectator sees nothing but darkness under the table, as it is customary for a “black-on-black” (the irony of the statement is intended) effect to be used. There is an interesting paradox of success and failure, concealment and revelation in Ellison’s image, for even as he gives the trick away the trick remains powerfully effective. Such paradox lies at the heart of secrecy and the African American body and especially secrecy and the black women playwrights whose one-acts will be discussed later.

But magic and theatricality are significant not merely in the context of stage sleight of hand but also in that of supernatural magic, which is inextricably linked with stage magic. In Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic, Simon During writes that stage magic, or what he calls “secular” magic, “cannot be disentangled from its opposing twin, magic with a supernatural punch[;] . . . there is no difference between the truth-content of secular and supernatural magics. One is as illusory as the other, and always was entangled with the other” (2). Indeed, as During goes on, “entertainment-and-fictional magic refers back to its ‘real’ double even when departing from it. Thus the logic of secular magic is describable only in relation to a magic with supernatural purpose” (3). Magic is therefore a liminal, fluid form of theatrical performance ensconced in complex systems of belief all of which rely upon a unifying mode of secrecy. Both secular and religious magic are interpolated within the multivalent medium of secrecy, working reciprocally to create effects that are simulations of one another.

Marcel Mauss addresses this fluid reciprocity when he raises the thorny question, “[H]ow is it possible for a sorcerer to believe in magic, when he must constantly come face to face with the true nature of his methods and their results?” (93). As he notes, here “we must confront the serious problem of fraud and simulation in magic” (93), and after discussing cases of magicians who simultaneously realize the simulation of their practice while also believing in magic as a “real” phenomenon, Mauss observes that “the magician’s simulations are of the same nature as those observed in nervous conditions. As a result, it is both voluntary and involuntary at the same time. Even when it starts off as a self-imposed state, the simulation recedes into the background and we end up with perfect hallucinatory states” (96). In this magical performance, the performer, if Mauss is to be believed, becomes fraught by his or her own hiddenness, which is the mysterious presence of magic. “The magician then becomes his own dupe,” Mauss writes, “in the same way as an actor when he forgets that he is playing a role” (96). Ultimately, this magician, unlike stage magicians who are self-conscious actors, stands as a purveyor of public life secrets who “pretends because pretence is demanded of him, because people seek him out and beseech him to act. He is not a free agent” but rather “is forced to play either a role demanded by
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tradition or one which comes up to his client's expectations. . . . He is a kind of official, vested by society with authority, and it is incumbent upon the society to believe in him” (97). And so, Mauss continues, “what a magician believes and what the public believes are two sides of the same coin. . . . It is this belief which the magician shares with the rest, which means that neither his sleights of hand nor his failures will raise any doubts as to the genuineness of the magic itself” (97).

Thus even “religious” magic is theatrical. Mauss posits a three-part structure of magical performance reminiscent of Beckerman’s theatrical construct, writing that in

magic we have officers, actions and representations: we call a person who accomplishes magical actions a magician, even if he is not a professional; magical representations are those ideas and beliefs which correspond to magical actions; as for these actions, with regard to which we have defined the other elements of the magic, we call them magical rites. (18)

Mauss’s structure obviously resembles Beckerman’s theatrical construct, with the magician as the actor/performer, the magical rites being the virtual actions, and the magical representations the manipulation of ideas and expectations which are assigned the phoneme “illusions.” But Mauss’s construct must be understood to perform in a different remove of theatrical space, for the professional secular magician is actually performing the role of magician, or, more accurately, a synthesis of various magician roles assembled from this “previous” theatrical space in an assemblage that resembles Lévi-Strauss’s notion of bricolage, with the actor serving as a bricoleur.18 In this recycling of signifiers, the rites and representations equally recreate those already established in previous theaters so that the magician creates and operates within a palimpsestic mythic place made of several layers largely transparent but each bearing a unique opaque trace of cultural-historic specificity.

Magic, religion, and African American subjectivity and performance interrelate in ways that again reveal secrecy’s multiple interpolating. Since the time of Christianity’s beginning, magic has taken on a dubious position in Western culture. “Early Christianity darkened magic,” During writes, tracing the development of magic throughout Western history. “From the beginning of the Christian era, learned and popular magics were persecuted by religious authorities who associated them not just with paganism but with the devil” (7). This diabolic coloring of magic took on a hue rife with ethnocentrism with the initiation of European colonizing practices. In fact, During goes on to assert that
European expansion, especially into Africa, perpetuated the old division between “white” magic and pagan or diabolic magics. A patina of racism intruded into the blackness of “black” magic, which now also connoted skin color. The old terms “necromancy” (literally, magic conjuring up the dead) and “negromancy” (black or malevolent divination) had been used interchangeably in the medieval period, and the linguistic accident which tied death to blackness would be exploited, perhaps unknowingly, by colonialist discourse. Certainly, after about 1780, African varieties of supernaturalism (often called “mumbo-jumbo,” “voodoo,” “zombie-ism” and so on) were invoked for a diversity of white agendas. (10)

While these negative connotations of magic and African-originated religion were expounded by white people, such magical forms actually served black peoples as ways of subverting those very colonial forces. Not only voodoo but also other forms of religion, including Yorùbá religious practices and Islam, contributed to the rich religious texture the slaves carried across the Atlantic and combined/stuffed-into various forms of Christianity. This amalgamation of religion was inundated with secrecy that struck terror in white slaveholders but helped unify slaves and articulate their oppressive situation. As Raboteau explains, most slaveholders feared that converting slaves to Christianity would incite revolt despite the fact that the precepts it offered were essentially antirevolutionary. Moreover, conversion implied that blacks were humans with souls to save rather than chattel, an obviously problematic idea for those white people involved in the Peculiar Institution who also saw themselves as upstanding Christians.

The threat of subversion was heightened by the fact that African American religious practices were often carried out in secret. Even though controlled instruction and worship finally became generally established in plantation culture, Raboteau notes that the religious experience of the slaves was by no means fully contained in the visible structures of the institutional church. From the abundant testimony of fugitive and freed slaves it is clear that the slave community had an extensive religious life of its own, hidden from the eyes of the master. In the secrecy of the quarters or the seclusion of the brush arbors (“hush harbors”) the slaves made Christianity truly their own. (212)

Hush harbors thus made the familiar strange, outside of visibility and therefore outside of control. The fear of such covert religious activity is thoroughly registered, for example, in white aristocratic Virginia writer Thomas Nelson Page's story “No Haid Pawn” in which black people whose religion stresses
visceral “belief” over cerebral “reason” are metaphorically linked with an abolitionist- and ghost-haunted plantation.

Where hush harbors infuse the familiar with secrecy, the traces of African religions signify that which was unknown and therefore fearful to the white community. For African Americans, Anthony B. Pinn insists, the religious experience reached beyond Christianity to include herbalism, witchcraft, and conjure, which was “a theory for explaining the mystery of evil [as well as] . . . a practice for doing something about it. . . . [And the] ultimate source of the conjurer’s power was either God or the devil” (277). At the same time, voodoo as both cult and system of magic persisted in the United States as well as in Haiti, where in addition to its saturation in magic and secrecy it also served as the realm in which secret societies were formed as early as the revolution of 1804 and which have continued to play a critical role in politics there to the present.20 Certainly the separation of white and black religious practices did not end with the abolition of slavery: Yvonne Patricia Chireau makes the point that where conjure has always been kept secret from white people, after Emancipation new notions of “respectability” among African Americans drove it further underground as “part of a hidden tradition, obscured from public view, but still deeply embedded within Black-American culture” (87).21 By the time of the Harlem Renaissance, religion was central to secret (meaning unavailable for white viewing) African American life.

III

The interconnections between secrecy and magic in African American performance and theater grow deeper and exceptional when considered in light of gender—specifically, when considering the positionality and experiences peculiar to black women. Both secrecy and magic are especially significant in theorizations of women, generally. In This Sex which Is Not One, Luce Irigaray shows that for male thinkers and masculine-dominated discourses “the woman” has conventionally been a mystery and her body a secret. Focusing on biological difference (however problematic Judith Butler has shown that doing so can be), Irigaray observes that where “man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman’s body, language . . . [and] this self-caressing requires at least a minimum of activity,” a woman “touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity” (24). Where a man is sexually characterized by “one of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning,” the woman is “at least two
(lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself, but without any possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched” (26). The woman “within herself . . . is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other” because “her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact” (24), and she operates in both active and passive sexual roles, a doubleness that informs a distinct poetic of presence and hiddenness in her body and sexuality, for she takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation. While her body finds itself thus eroticized, and called to a double-movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the “subject,” her sexual organ represents the horror of nothing to see. A defect in this systematics of representation and desire. A “hole” in its scoptophilic lens. It is already evident in Greek statuary that this nothing-to-see has to be excluded, rejected, from such a scene of representation. Woman’s genitals are simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their “crack.” (26)

This condition of hiddenness describes a poetic of concealment and secrecy, for a woman’s body is, according to Irigaray, simply unknowable and indescribable even to herself. Her possession, maintaining, and revealing of secrets is ambivalent, uncontrolled, uncontrollable even, for “the ‘thickness’ of that ‘form,’ the layering of its volume, its expansions and contractions and even the spacing of the moments in which it produces itself as form—all this the feminine keeps secret. Without knowing it” (27). Such socially constructed and negotiated dynamics appear in Irigaray’s observation that if woman is asked to sustain, to revive, man’s desire, the request neglects to spell out what it implies as to the value of her own desire. A desire of which she is not aware, moreover, at least not explicitly. But one whose force and continuity are capable of nurturing repeatedly and at length all the masquerades of “femininity” that are expected of her. (27)

Just as secrecy haunts a female identification, so have women been linked in unique ways to magic. In classifying different types of figures who may be magicians or associated with magic, Mauss observes that such persons bear bodily, organic markings. “Nobody can become a magician at will,” he explains; “there are qualities which distinguish a magician from the layman. Some are acquired, some inherited; to some the qualities are lent while others actually possess them” (27). Although Mauss does not distinguish race as a
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mark of the magician, he does point to the marginal, those marked by variation, noting that in “the Middle Ages people looked for the devil’s mark” and that all “over the world there are people who have a peculiarly cunning look, who appear odd or untrustworthy, who blink at one strangely” and who “are all lumped together as magicians, along with nervous and jumpy individuals or subnormal peoples” (27). After further enumeration, he makes the striking observation “that all these individuals—the disabled and the ecstatic, the pedlars, hawkers, jugglers and neurotics—actually form kinds of social classes. They possess magical powers not through their individual peculiarities but as a consequence of society’s attitude towards them and their kind” (28). To this group Mauss adds yet another: women. I quote at length.

They are everywhere recognized as being more prone to magic than men, not so much because of their physical characteristics, but because of the social attitudes these characteristics provide. The critical periods of their life cycle lead to bemusement and apprehension, which place them in a special position. And it is precisely at periods such as puberty, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth that a woman’s attributes reach their greatest intensity. It is usually at such times that women are supposed to provide subjects or act as agents for magical action. Old women are witches; virgins are valuable auxiliaries; menstrual blood and other like products are common specifics. Moreover, it is true that women are particularly disposed to hysteria, and their nervous crises make them susceptible to superhuman forces, which endow them with special powers. However, even outside of these critical periods, which occupy a not insignificant part of their life, women are the butt of superstitions and juridical and religious taboos, which clearly mark them off as a separate class in society. They are made out to be more different than men than they are in fact. They are said to be the fount of mysterious activities, the sources of magical power. On the other hand, since women are excluded from most religious cults—or if admitted, reduced to a passive role—the only practices left to them on their own initiative are magical ones. The magical attributes of women derive primarily from their social position and consequently are more talked about than real. In fact, there are fewer female practitioners of magic than public opinion would have us believe. The curious result is that on the whole, it is the men who perform the magic while women are accused of it. (28)

The layering of seeing illustrated in Mauss’s comments is important, for women “are seen” by men as magical in both active and passive ways. Mauss stresses this perception as perception (he uses the phrase “in fact” more than
once) and is keenly aware in the final quoted sentence of the fact that men readily ascribe negative magical abilities to women, presumably blaming women when things go wrong. What is significant about Mauss’s assertions is that they directly present one way that women come into hiddenness as other specifically through notions of what magic is.

Through Mauss’s siphoning off women as a magically supercharged “separate class” in light of devil-associated magical markings, we can begin to consider the specific situation of African American women as another group within the already marginalized group of African Americans generally. Not only are such individuals black, they are women—as Spivak suggests, they are not only women but more so since “if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways” (90). Evelyyn M. Hammonds uses language almost identical to Irigaray’s but applies it to black women specifically, writing that their sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision, as a “void” or empty space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women’s bodies are always already colonized. In addition, this always already colonized black female body has so much sexual potential it has none at all. Historically, black women have reacted to the repressive force of the hegemonic discourses on race and sex that constructed this image with silence, secrecy, and a particularly self-chosen invisibility. (171)

Black women can thus represent the visible invisible, a situation imposed upon them but also one that can be appropriated, subverted, signified on. The positive role of being objectified by a male gaze can itself be turned into an active role. Where, as Audre Lorde writes, “within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism,” it is also the case that this “visibility which makes [them] most vulnerable is also the source of [their] greatest strength” (41). In other words, black women act and react within this external-internal interpolation in secrecy—something that Joice Heth may have been trying to do, although with little or no resulting liberation.

Even more than white women, black women have both signified and performed as magical figures. Pinn notes that “women made up the bulk of voodoo practitioners” (39), and Chireau, exploring black women’s involvement with “alternative spiritual beliefs,” writes that women “were at the center of the world of conjure” (75). Zora Neale Hurston offers the following
anecdote in *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*:

“What is the truth?” Dr. Holly asked me, and knowing that I could not answer him he answered himself through a Voodoo ceremony in which the Mambo, that is the priestess, richly dressed is asked this question ritualistically. She replies by throwing back her veil and revealing her sex organs. The ceremony means that this is the infinite, the ultimate truth. There is no mystery beyond the mysterious source of life. The ceremony continues on another phase after this. It is a dance analogous to the nuptial flight of the queen bee. The Mambo discards six veils in this dance and falls at last naked, and spiritually intoxicated, to the ground. It is considered the highest honor for all males participating to kiss her organ of creation, for Damballa, the god of gods, has permitted them to come face to face with truth. (113–14)

This passage is particularly significant because it combines Du Bois’s notion of the Veil, the *chora*, and the secrecy of the black female body. The female organ serves as the ultimate secret-as-fetish.

Houston Baker is especially keen to link black female spatiality with magic in *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing*. Drawing on Bachelard’s discussion of imagistic fields as phenomenological definers of space for readers of literature, Baker considers black female spaces that are defined by “spirit.” He argues “that a poetics of Afro-American women’s writing is, in many ways, a phenomenology of conjure” (66). Speaking to one of the prime ways of maintaining secrets, Baker ventures the observation that if “one seeks the classical in Afro-American expressive culture, one discovers without great difficulty a mode of discourse or performance that I call ‘mythomania.’ . . . Mythomania is most aptly defined as: ‘a compulsion to embroider the truth, to exaggerate, or to tell lies’” (74). Baker pays particular attention to the theatricality of black female spaces of conjure, offering the following striking account, discussing the theatrics of voodoo captured in a report from the New Orleans Times-Democrat of 24 June 1896. Describing a voodoo festival it reads as follows; “The rites consisted in building a large fire, in a dance on the part of the central personage, the destruction of a black cat and its devouring raw. The scene concluded with an orgie, in which the savage actors ended by tearing off their garments” . . . . The participants in the festival were doubtless “actors” who must have been delighted with the newspaper’s “savage” accounting since it probably increased the white patronage of future occasions. (79–80)22

This black female exceptionalness was accompanied by and was the
result of a unique spatiality. Patricia Hill Collins particularly explores the spatiality of black women, writing that “African-American women’s social location as a collectivity has fostered distinctive albeit heterogeneous Black feminist intellectual traditions” (*Black Feminist Thought* 17). She discusses two spatial-economic factors that established spaces which influenced black women’s subjectivity. The first is that “prior to World War II, racial segregation in urban housing became so entrenched that the majority of African-American women lived in self-contained Black neighborhoods where their children attended overwhelmingly Black schools, and where they themselves belonged to all-Black churches and similar community organizations” (9). The second was the set of “common experiences [black women] gained from their jobs. Prior to World War II, U.S. Black women worked primarily in two occupations—agriculture and domestic work” (10). While these spaces were not exclusively black or female, both contributed to the generation of a uniquely black female perspective, and Collins goes on to note regarding the second factor that black women’s “ghettoization in domestic work sparked an important contradiction. Domestic work fostered U.S. Black women’s economic exploitation, yet it simultaneously created the conditions for distinctively Black and female forms of resistance” (10). These forms of resistance resulted from the fact that these women were able to be in the otherwise inscrutable (to them) space of white public-life secrecy. As Collins explains, domestic work allowed African-American women to see White elites, both actual and aspiring, from perspectives largely obscured from Black men and from these groups themselves. On one level this insider relationship was satisfying to all concerned. Accounts of Black domestic workers stress the sense of self-affirmation the women experienced at seeing racist ideology demystified. But on another level these Black women knew that they could never belong to their White “families.” They were economically exploited workers and thus would remain outsiders. The result was being placed in a curious outsider-within social location . . . a peculiar marginality that stimulated a distinctive Black women’s perspective on a variety of themes. . . . (10–11)23

Bonner, Burrill, Duncan, Graham, Hurston, Johnson, Miller, and Spence were not domestic workers (they were well-educated representatives of the Talented Tenth), but they nevertheless understood the nature of the constrictions of space that the majority of black women faced, and certainly they themselves were not untouched by it. They, too, faced the “peculiar marginality that stimulated a distinctive Black Women’s perspective”; accomplished as they were, they faced limitations of options for publication and/or produc-
tion of their works. As Gloria T. Hull notes, “[D]espite what appears to be full participation of women in the Harlem Renaissance, one can discern broad social factors and patterns of exclusion” (Color, Sex, and Poetry 7). Noting Locke’s misogyny as well as that of other leaders in the Harlem Renaissance, Hull observes that the “personality-patronnage [sic] issue broadens into general revelations about the customary male circles of power and friendship, which during the period crossed racial lines” (9). It is hardly surprising that black women writers formed their own groups, however loosely constituted; in such black-female communities as Georgia Douglas Johnson’s S-Street Salon (the sobriquet given to the informal meetings at her house in Washington, D.C.), there was freedom to exchange ideas under the protection of secrecy.

What must be noted about such black-women’s spaces, however, is that they were not exclusive but, like secrecy itself, characterized by multiple interpolation—a fact that carries implications for strategies of both concealment and revelation. It would be inaccurate to suggest that Johnson’s S-Street Salon was a sort of black woman’s secret society simply because numerous men are known to have been present at the meetings. It is actually the permeability of these black women–controlled spaces that makes them sites of secrecy-discourse—places where concealment and revelation could be controlled by black women. In their lives as well as in their work, one can see similar suggestions of alternate oppression by various foes, whether they be dangerous white men, unsympathetic or well-meaning but ineffective white women, or powerful black men. The first two groups seem obvious enough external enemies (although George Hutchinson documents the role of white people in enabling Harlem Renaissance artists and writers), but it is also the case that while there were certainly black women in visible leadership roles, “the increasingly masculinist bias within the African American literary community [created] . . . an environment in which . . . [the] daily [lives] of Black women [were] no longer perceived as viable sites of meaningful resistance” (Mance 19–20). This principle transfers to black women’s writing, in which they articulated their perspectives as black women and clearly counted black women in their imagined audiences but also realized that black or white men as well as white women could and would encounter the work. What these black women could do in their writing was to reveal as well as conceal while controlling that revealing. These spaces, whether “real” groupings of black women or fictional ones or simply the spaces of a written text to be performed, operated within and/or created secrecy-discourse game situations in which secrecy-moves could be used to mobilize enemies, educate potential friends, and consolidate members of the in-group. Theater was one of these secrecy-discourse situations, and these writers’ one-act plays exhibit
multilayered approaches to their dealings with individuals or groups who were to varying degrees outsiders.

Consider, for example, Eulalie Spence. In her biographical sketch of Spence in her anthology *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950*, Kathy A. Perkins offers an interesting and revealing anecdote:

A member of Du Bois’s Krigwa Players from 1926 until the group’s demise two years later, Spence respected the activist, but the two had major disagreements. Du Bois attempted on many occasions to persuade her to use her excellent writing skills for propaganda. Spence emphasized that her rationale for avoiding propaganda issues was that she knew nothing about lynchings, rapes, nor the blatant racial injustices in this country. As a West Indian, she claimed, these issues were not part of her background. Spence was also adamant in her belief that a play could not depend on propaganda for success. She was a “folk dramatist,” who wrote for fun and entertainment. (106)

It seems evident that Spence was playing Du Bois. Undoubtedly Spence really did write “for fun and entertainment,” and some of her plays bear a marked light-heartedness and foregrounding of “play.” But when one reads *Undertow*, which examines the turgid life of a dysfunctional family in Harlem in which a black man’s black wife is jealous of his lighter-skinned ex-lover, the conflict of which ends in his murdering his wife, one might wonder if “fun and entertainment” were Spence’s only reasons for writing. Likewise, her play *Fool’s Errand* partly critiques the potential for injustice in a patriarchally inscribed black religion. However much “fun” Spence may have had writing, her plays could also cut deep, much deeper than her alleged purposes suggest. What emerges from Perkins’s account of the interaction between Du Bois and Spence is not so much that Spence was politically unaware or unconcerned, but that she did not care to have her voice colonized by Du Bois’s propagandistic designs. She sought the visibility he offered her, but she also wanted to reserve her own rights and control of her writing self. Indeed, Yvonne Shafer points out that when Spence’s play *Fool’s Errand* won $200 in New York’s 1927 National Little Theatre Tournament, “a dispute [arose] about the prize which Du Bois accepted to pay for production expenses, so it did not go to Spence. . . . This exacerbated the differences between them and may have led to the disintegration of the Krigwa players shortly thereafter” (275).

Spence may have been interacting with James V. Hatch in a similar manner some five decades later when he would ask for a copy of her play *The Hunch*. In a letter dated May 28, 1970, she informs Hatch, “I am sorry that I have no copy of *Foreign Mail* or *The Hunch*” (SCRBC). Yet her niece was
in possession of a copy of the *Carolina Quarterly* (now in the Schomburg Center) that included the full text of her play, and it is not beyond reason to think that Spence may have in fact had at least a copy of the typescript of *Foreign Mail* at that time. Of course, Spence may have misplaced either or both of the texts and found it simpler to say or really believed she no longer had copies (or maybe she had given them away and later recovered them), and it may strain hermeneutics to suggest that this instance represents a conscious secrecy-move. But her recalcitrant streak can be often found intertwined with distinct secrecy-moves. As Perkins has noted, the light-skinned West Indian Spence apparently passed as a teacher at the Eastern District High School in Brooklyn; even her star student, Joseph Papp, claims not to have realized that she was African American (Perkins, email). Another example of a secrecy-move can be found in a letter to Alain Locke dated June 1, 1927:

> I have also taken various cultural courses at the College of the City of New York. (I have no degree.) I could get one with very little effort, but I can’t be bothered. After all, those things mean very little, really, as I see them.

> Some people wonder that I am teaching in a High School, without a degree. Well, let them. My qualifications were satisfactory to the Board of Education and that is all that matters. (SCRBC)

Spence was passing both in terms of race and education, and as she goes on to acknowledge that her letter has become more than a simple biography, one can discern her jealous preservation of her credentials and space.

Georgia Douglas Johnson apparently employed similar passive-aggressive secrecy-moves in her dealings with powerful black men. Alice Dunbar-Nelson notes in her diary that “Georgia has done the big thing in letting Locke, DuBois [sic], and Braithwaite weed out her verses until only the perfect ones remain. What she has left are little gems, characterized by a finish of workmanship that is seldom seen in our people” (88). Like Spence, Johnson displayed a marked tendency to be, as Martha Gilman Bower puts it, “[e]xtremely secretive about her past, her heritage, her parents and her grandparents—even her age—Johnson, like some of her characters, seemed to suffer from a repressed identity, which caused her to be ‘ontologically insecure’” (13). Dunbar-Nelson writes that “Georgia showed me the manuscript of her new book, which Braithwaite is offering to the publishers. She does exquisite verses, and these are wonderfully fine—a story, running like a fine golden thread through them all” (88). More specifically, she speculates as to the inspiration of the volume:

> “An Autumn Idyll,” it is called, the love story of a woman in the autumn of
life. It makes you blush at times, the baring of inmost secrets of a soul, as it
does. I wonder what Link [Johnson's husband] thinks of it? You might call it poetic inspiration, if you will, but it looks suspiciously to me as if Georgia had had an affair, and it had been a source of inspiration to her. Something like my “Dream Book,” though I would never give it to the public, only the fragments which I did give—the sonnet “Violets,” and the one or two others, for which E. J. S. has never forgiven me. (88)

Turning to “literary” writing, Marita Bonner grapples with secrecy and the complexities of a black woman's subject position in her essay “On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored.” Tracing the grave threat that black women's hopes for the future tailspin into despair as they grow older, Bonner notes that in youth black women envision a bright future but “one day you find yourself entangled—enmeshed—pinioned in the seaweed of a Black Ghetto” (FSE 3). In this ghetto people are “shoved aside in a bundle because of color and with no more in common. Unless color is, after all, the real bond” (4). She observes that there “are all the earmarks of a group within a group” and while a black woman might “hear that up at New York this is to be seen; that, to be heard . . . you know that—being a woman—you cannot . . . break away to see or hear anything in a city that is supposed to see and hear too much” (4–5). “That's being a woman,” Bonner explains; “A woman of color” (5). Not only are black women restricted spatially, but, Bonner goes on, “Why do they [white people? black men?] see a colored woman only as a gross collection of desires, all controlled, reaching out for their Apollos and the Quasimodos with arid indiscrimination?” (5). Bonner closes the essay with an important observation about a strategic secrecy-move in a passage that employs secrecy-moves in its form (its ellipses and dashes, as will be explained later).

So—being a woman—you can wait.
You must sit quietly without a chirp. Not sodden—and weighted as if your feet were cast in the iron of your soul. Not wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty.
But quiet; quiet. Like Buddha—who brown like I am—sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself; motionless and knowing, a thousand years before the white man knew there was so very much difference between feet and hands.
Motionless on the outside. But on the inside?
Silent.
Still . . . “Perhaps Buddha is a woman.”
So you too. Still; quiet; with a smile, ever so slight, at the eyes so that Life will flow into and not by you. And you can gather, as it passes, the essences, the overtones, the tints, the shadows; draw understanding to yourself.

And then you can, when Time is ripe, swoop to your feet—at your full height—at a single gesture.

Ready to go where?

Why . . . Wherever God motions. (7–8)

In a similar literary work with autobiographical aspects, Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* interrogates secrecy and in-group cohesion. Janie refuses to tell her story either to the men lazing on the porches or to the black women who are critical and/or jealous of her. Instead, she talks to her friend Phoeby (an exemplification of the black lesbian poetic Barbara Smith identifies) in a small confined space, right in the vision but not within the hearing of men: she occupies the signifying space of the visible invisible. She and Phoeby together constitute an other group, a secret society, as it were, a room of their own apart but still visible. A space in which they can show black men and the world the female bodies they desire but where they can also keep certain things secret. In the meantime, the black men on the porch of Eatonville are waiting, according to Pheoby, for Judgment Day because that is “de day dat every secret is s’posed to be made known. They wants to be there and hear it all” (6). Of course, Hurston’s passing into obscurity late in life and her subsequent burial in an unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Florida, is a sad instance of a black woman’s passing into invisibility.

These are merely a few instances of the ways secrecy touched these black women’s lives; equally sorrowful has been the hiddenness of them and their works after their deaths. Their one-acts (and in some cases the women themselves) have been enveloped in what Derrida calls “the secret of the archive”:

What can a library do with secret letters? We shall define libraries in general as places devoted to keeping the secret but insofar as they give it away. Giving a secret away may mean telling it, revealing it, publishing it, divulging it, as well as keeping it so deeply in the crypt of a memory that we forget it is there or even cease to understand and have access to it. In one sense a secret kept is always a secret lost. (20)

Perkins, Judith L. Stephens, and others have worked to pluck the texts of these black women’s works from the archive, sometimes having to save the archive itself as well as jump-starting critical conversation about them.26 The rediscovery and reclamation of black women’s voices that have been ongoing
for at least three decades are even now still unearthing their one-acts, and many of them actually remain unpublished and even, in some cases, lost. Although the secret of the archive was not written into these plays, the fact of their being unknown for so long heightens the aura of secrecy surrounding them and is particularly painful because it fulfills the fear of black women’s silencing that runs throughout so many of them.

This book seeks to add to the effort to bring these women forth from the archival closet.
Notes

Induction

1. It should be noted, for the record, that Barnum did free Heth after buying her and that his politics were abolitionist.
2. All emphases in quoted material are original unless otherwise noted.

On Secrecy, Magic, and Black Women Playwrights

1. For a reader who may be encountering these names for the first time, see Bernard L. Peterson’s *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers*; Yvonne Shafer’s *American Women Playwrights: 1900–1950*; and Judith L. Stephens’s “The Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement,” which provide introductions to these writers, including biographical sketches of them as well as synopses of their one-act plays.
3. On secret societies, see Arkon Daraul’s *Secret Societies: A History*; Norman MacKenzie’s *Secret Societies*; Jasper Godwin Ridley’s *The Freemasons*.
A History of the World’s Most Powerful Secret Society; George Simmel’s “The Secret and
the Secret Society.” See especially on black masonry George Williamson Crawford’s
Prince Hall and His Followers; Being a Monograph on the Legitimacy of Negro Masonry.

4. See Dale Cockrell’s Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their
World; Susan Gubar’s Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture; W.
T. Lhamon Jr’s Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop; Eric
Lott’s Love and Theft: Blackface, Minstrelsy and the American Working Class; William J.
Mahar’s Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum Amer-
ican Popular Culture; Robert C. Toll’s Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-
Century America; and the essays in Bean et al., Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in
Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy. Behind such masking, Booker T. Washington
could enforce his vision for improving the lives of African Americans, although this
maneuvering carries a sinister side, as is illustrated in Ellison’s Invisible Man and argued
recently by Gary Totten. Of course, using their own tactics against the enemy could
backfire, as is the case with Charles W. Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar, who so
well mimicked Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris that most readers missed
the point altogether.

5. Not to say that the cupboard is bare concerning theorizations of secrecy in lit-
erary criticism. Sedgwick’s Epistemology of the Closet and scholarly works by numerous
queer theorists examine a community steeped in a poetics of secrecy: Oliver Buckton,
for example, explores the Victorian “autobiographical tension between secrecy and
disclosure” (4) surrounding discourses of homosexuality. Leslie Fiedler explores the
secret fear that the “freak” as Other might in fact dwell within the so-called normal
person’s “secret self.” The summer 2007 issue of MELUS takes as its theme “Thresholds,
Secrets, and Knowledge,” editor Martha J. Cutter observing in “Notes from the
Editor: Thresholds, Secrets, and Knowledge” that for “many ethnic writers, the crossing
of various thresholds—from one geographic or geopolitical realm to another, from one
racial category to another, or from stories of the past to stories of the present/future—is
supposed to yield a type of new knowledge. Yet the crossing of thresholds, bound-
aries, and borders does not always lead to enlightenment. Or, perhaps the knowledge
earned is not what one expects, resulting in the production of new secrets—mispris-
sions which conceal as much as they reveal. I think of Booker T. Washington traveling
around Europe . . . crossing national boundaries, trying to move his people into a new
future, yet deliberately concealing the racist violence that existed in the US in order to
instantiate the European serf as the ‘farthest man down’” (1). Additionally, D. A. Miller
considers secrecy in Dickens, and Sarah Robertson has recently explored secrecy in
Jayne Anne Phillips.

6. I use “somatic-psychic” instead of “psychosomatic” in order to avoid privileging
the psychological, which is the heritage of the latter term.

7. Miller goes on to discuss the “open secret,” which is not what I mean by secret-as-
fetish. I mean, rather, the secret as a form that signifies a function rather than content,
a concept closer to Derrida’s definition of the function of Certes/certes in the writing
of Cixous. Noting that the name/word is an anagram for “secret,” Derrida writes that
“Certes is the Secret, the trope or Secret place of the story that you will never reach”
( Geneses 45).

8. I have been and will be using the term interpolate to signify the full scope of indi-
vidual and group involvement in secrecy. While I will continue to explore the nuances of
these various types of involvement, I want to state at this point that while the term,
for my purposes, signifies the situation of people compelled by their placement within
A certain systems of secrecy to perpetuate victimization as well as people tragically caught
within secrecy that victimizes them, the term is not meant to function as an exonera-
tion of individuals or groups whose connections with and performances of secrecy are
used to oppressive ends. What I do want the term to do is to work as a neutral one that
allows not only for such ways people are “caught up in” and/or use secrecy but also
for the fact that the distinctions between conscious and unconscious, intentional and
unintentional involvement in secrecy are extremely nebulous.

9. I use the term discourse instead of interaction or play to highlight the economy of
visible signs that players manipulate to control the revealing and concealing of informa-
tion. I will not be developing quantitative formulas and decision trees or applying prefab-
ricated ones (such as the “prisoner’s dilemma”) to specific games. Doing so lies beyond
the scope of this discussion, although I think such a project would be extremely helpful
in precisely delineating the paradoxes of strategy for these writers and their characters
and considering how such models compare with ones in later historical moments (I am
regrettably the least qualified person to attempt such an effort). Still, I will be borrowing
terms from game theory, as derived from the texts by Morton D. Davis, Prajit K. Dutta,
Larry Samuelson, and Philip D. Straffin. Regarding game theory and its connections
with literature, see Huizinga and the essays in Game, Play, Literature (edited by Jacques
Ehrmann).

10. Michel Beaujour recognizes a similar three-part breakdown of moves and the
overlapping among them in his discussion of game theory and poetics. “Given the fact
that I become a part of the game as a poet,” he writes, “I face several options, which
parallel those of any player who has freely entered the game” (59). These three options
are (1) to play “according to the rules”; (2) to “pretend to leave the game in disgust
and . . . write nothing”; and (3) to “leave the game, saying [that one does not] have to
play in order to be a poet” (59). Beaujour goes on to assert, “I believe this short list of
options contains all the fundamental poetics which are possible within our culture. The
actual poetics of any single poet or group of poets must be a variant of one of these, or
a cross between two or all of them. Intermediate types are confused or even coherent,
which of course, does not prelude [sic] their existence. Also these three options may be
adopted successively by any one poet or group of poets, usually starting with One and
moving on to Two or Three” (59–60).

11. In The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative, Frank Kermode
explores the centrality of secrecy as coding. He notes that texts “cast shadows important
to the perceiving eye” (20) and in order to “divine the true, the latent sense [of a text],
you need to be of the elect, the institution” while outsiders “must content themselves
with the manifest” (3). Secrecy is thus entwined methodologically and politically with
interpretation, because “the history of interpretation may be thought of as a history of
exclusions” (20). Kermode examines the biblical book of Mark, prodding its manifold
secrets in content and style and arguing that it seems to function in two ways: one
“says the stories are obscure on purpose to damn the outsiders; the other . . . says that
they are not necessarily impenetrable, but that the outsiders, being what they are, will
misunderstand them anyway” (32), and so “the text as we have it appears both to reveal
and proclaim, and at the same time to obscure and conceal” (59). Besides the fact that
such coding resembles the “cryptonomy” Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok describe,
Kermode’s observations speak to the very important psychological, linguistic, social,
and literary aspects of secrecy, because interpretation is a central aspect of forming
in-groups/out-groups which either can or cannot interpret given texts/situations. Such coding is part of the phaneric masking Baker identifies, which has a double function: “first, the indigenous comprehend the territory within their own vale/veil more fully than any intruder. . . . Second, the indigenous sound appears monstrous and deformed only to the intruder” (51–52).

12. Regarding Socrates, see Plato’s Republic. For an interesting discussion of Cold War–era concepts of secrecy, see Edward A. Shils’s The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Politics.

13. Regan recognizes two types of natural secrets: a simple one (which is learned “by chance”) and an extorted one, which is “learned fraudulently” (5). The entrusted secret “may be either explicit or implicit” when the pledge of secrecy is asked for or if it is demanded by “the office or function of the person to whom the secret is communicated”—the latter two designations being referred to also as official and professional secrets, respectively (8).

14. Derrida reads this event as a type of violence. This violence is complex in accord with the complex balancing aspect of secrecy, because Derrida argues that “revealing by effraction the so-called proper name . . . reveals the first nomination which was already an expropriation, but it denudes also that which since then functioned as the proper, the so-called proper, substitute of the deferred proper, perceived by the social and moral consciousness as the proper, the reassuring seal of self-identity, the secret” (Of Grammatology 112). Derrida goes on to write that Levi-Strauss “comes to disturb order and natural peace, the complicity which peacefully binds the good society to itself in its play” and “it is the anthropological eruption which breaks the secret of the proper names and the innocent complicity governing the play of young girls” (113). Explaining that “one cannot or rather must not incriminate the innocent young girls,” Derrida argues that a “violation” is brought on by the “rusing intrusion of the foreigner who, having seen and heard, is now going to ‘excite’ the young girls, loosen their tongues, and get them to divulge the precious names” (113–14).

15. Regarding performance as incarnated in both formal theater and theatrum mundi, see, in addition to texts already cited, Auslander, Brisset and Edgley, Lynda Christian, Kershaw, Phelan, Roach, Schechner, and the essays in Reinelt and Roach.

16. On the material conditions of performance and reception, see Susan Bennett’s Theatre Audiences; Marvin A. Carlson’s Places of Performance; Lee Simonson’s The Stage Is Set; and the essays in Theatre Praxis: Teaching Drama through Practice (edited by Christopher McCullough).


18. See Lévi-Strauss’s The Savage Mind.

19. Regarding this blend of religions, Raboteau writes that “it should be emphasized
that it is the continuity of perspective that is significant, more so than the fact that cultures of particular African gods, such as Shango or Elegba, have been transmitted to the New World. For new as well as old gods have come to be worshiped by Afro-Americans, but the new, like the old, have been perceived in traditionally African ways” (16).

20. See Lageure on the connections between these secret societies and Haitian politics.


22. Secrecy informs less exotic forms of black religion than voodoo. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham points out that “[c]hurches and households, both rejecting the worldly pleasure of the male turf, represented female areas” (59). Of course, this space was also ostensibly under the control of black men; one might recall Nanny’s saying in Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, “Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me” (16). Still, religion and its many magical incarnations inundate and are inundated by black women, as Valerie Lee argues in Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers.

23. This “peculiar marginality” is matched by a fraught group makeup that makes it impossible to speak of black women as a group in a simple way. Theorists have long been struggling to define black women without essentializing them, from Collins’s focusing on the “distinctive contours” (Black Feminist Thought 22) of a “Black women’s collective standpoint” (28) to Kevin Everod Quashie’s appropriation of a Spivakian “useful essentialism” (6) to address the complexities of black womanhood. Quashie, in fact, notes “the conundrum of essentialism: the subject is fluid and even fails to appear, though the outlines and meanings of its corpus are well known, even definitive” (3). For further discussion, see also Collins’s Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice as well as (and this list only begins to enumerate the many works on this topic) the books by bell hooks and the essays in All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies (edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith), and Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women (edited by Cheryl A. Wall).

24. Regarding women’s role in the Harlem Renaissance, see along with Hull, Cheryl A. Wall’s Women of the Harlem Renaissance. On groups of African Americans writers, see Elizabeth McHenry’s Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies. For discussion of various aspects of the Harlem Renaissance, see Jervis Anderson’s This Was Harlem; Arna Bontemps’s The Harlem Renaissance Remembered; James de Jongh’s Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination; Nathan Irvin Huggins’s Harlem Renaissance; Bruce Kellner’s The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Dictionary for the Era; Steven Watson’s The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920–1930; Cary D. Wintz’s Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance; and the essays in Victor Kramer and Robert A. Russ’s The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined and Amritjit Singh, William S. Shiver, and Stanley Brodwin’s The Harlem Renaissance: Reevaluations.

25. Not to suggest that Johnson always kept Locke at arm’s length; as Jeffrey C. Stewart has shown, Johnson and Locke came to be quite close.
26. Other champions of these playwrights whose books address these writers are Carol Allen, Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, Martha Bower Gilman, Gloria T. Hull, and David Krasner (in *A Beautiful Pageant*). Samuel Christian and Jasmin L. Lambert's dissertations undertake systematic explorations of these women's works as a distinct and exclusive group. For articles dealing with these authors in various groupings, see Doris E. Abramson, Jeanne-Marie A. Miller, and Andrea Nouryeh.

### The One-Acts


4. Thus providing an instant “secrecy of the archive.”

5. For a recent detailed discussion of depictions of African American dialect, see Lisa Cohen Minnick's *Dialect and Dichotomy: Literary Representations of African American Speech*.

6. Helene Keyssar particularly considers the importance and complexity of audience composition in African American drama.

7. She also notes that at the same time that understanding the hidden transcript “is solely dependent and indicative of the individual audience members' cultural competence” (102), African American Theater also “as a secure social space no matter how sequestered, offers a social side where the hidden transcript can readily be employed under the very nose of those who dominate” (105).

8. Further discussion of these figurations of Satan, goats, and blackness may be found in *A History of the Devil and the Idea of Evil from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, by Paul Carus; *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain*, by Fernando Cervantes; *A History of the Devil*, by Gerald Messadié; and *A History of the Devil*, by William Woods. For further discussion of racist assignment of signifiers of blackness, see George M. Fredrickson's *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914*; Robert E. Hood's *Begrimed and Black: Christian Traditions on Blacks and Blackness*; and Peter Rigby's *African Images: Racism and the End of Anthropology*. And for treatment of the development of concepts of blackness in America from the goat/Satan/blackness figuration to the “Black Beast” and twentieth-century depictions, see Bruce Dain's *A Hideous Monster of the Mind:*
American Race Theory in the Early Republic; Adam Lively’s Masks: Blackness, Race, and the Imagination; Mason Stokes’s The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy; and the essays in Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy’s Images of the Negro in American Literature and Janis Faye Hutchinson’s Cultural Portrayals of African Americans: Creating an Ethnic/Racial Identity.

9. The set is thus twice doubled, and done so in a way that is difficult to conceptualize. Is the “landscape” of the “Scene” to be installed on the upper level of the Skin-of-Civilization? Or should it somehow overlay both divisions? Obviously, a director may choose how to negotiate this matter. What is significant is that there should exist the doubled doubling in the set, a spatiality that seems distinctly that of African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance.

10. Quotes will be taken from The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson (edited by Judith L. Stephens) instead of Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson (edited by Claudia Tate) in the interest of using the more recently published and inclusive text.

11. Bower writes that Mrs. Temple “must live with a husband who can never know the secret—a phenomenon that will contribute to a lifelong inability to achieve authenticity of self. Both women must present false selves to the world” (23).

12. The latter especially informs this play as it was a cabinet that concealed an expert chess player who would direct the movements of a mannequin. See Cook for an especially provocative presentation of the history of the Automaton Chess Player.

13. For what it is worth in the context of secrecy, Miller occasionally wrote under the pen name “Jean Ray.”

14. In writing about the history of magic, During cites the rods of Moses and Aaron changing to serpents and their juxtaposition with the Egyptian magicians’ similar tricks.

15. Ethyl A. Young-Minor observes that Sabena speaks to Catherine in coded language (such coding being emblematic in her singing the spiritual “Go Down, Moses”) in order to ascertain her trustworthiness as one to whom she can reveal the secret of Harriet’s location. Young-Minor observes that Miller “writes black community as a complicated organism, with its own rules, regulations, insiders, and outsiders” (43–44), noting that Catherine is an outsider to Harriet’s group and showing that her failure to discern Sabena’s codes “demonstrates the tragic results when a member of the community cannot successfully engage in the call-and-response codes of black female dialogue” (41).

16. Like Sandy, Henry remains the spoilsport in all the game configurations in the play. The play closes with the boys surrounding Henry raising “their voices threateningly” (333).

17. Regarding Christophe, see Elizabeth Abbott’s Haiti: The Duvaliers and Their Legacy; Hubert Cole’s Christophe: King of Haiti; Sibylle Fischer’s Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution; Philippe R. Girard’s Paradise Lost: Haiti’s Tumultuous Journey from Pearl of the Caribbean to Third World Hot Spot; and David Nicholls’s From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour, and National Independence in Haiti.

18. Spence literally represents the perfect exemplar of the importance of speech, as one of her prime fields of study was elocution in her courses and activities in college, especially at Columbia. Numerous playbills list her as “elocutionist” as well as “actress” (SCRBC).

19. Allen refers to him as “the white absentee owner” (99) while Shafer writes that
he is “an avaricious white man [who] is punished for his cruelty to his Philippino wife” (273).

20. The spatiality of this play’s original performance conditions speaks to the confines of black female space, as it was performed in the basement of the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library, where the audience for the performances (held January 10, 19, and 24 of 1927 at 8:30 p.m.) were limited to two hundred, and tickets were to be bought from "Miss Louise Latimer at the 'Brown Bunny,' 2354 Seventh Avenue” (SCRBC).

21. Spence writes that Walter “opens the door and with a well aimed kick sends the Jew sprawling” (49).

22. In fact, dismantling dance and other things seen as being markers of essentialized blackness is part of another of Hurston’s one-acts entitled  *The First One*, which will be discussed later. It might also be noted that John and Emma drop the “ah” for “I” pronunciation in their speech.

23. Kraut notes that the play “demonstrate[s] more precisely how dance has the power to both unite and fracture groups” (34). Drawing a connection between difficulties in Hurston’s childhood (resulting from her father’s being mulatto [and showing favoritism to her sister] and her mother’s dying when Hurston was thirteen) and Emma’s obsession with skin color, Bower writes that the play “expresses the serious problems that accompany the objects of a gaze that ‘caint see,’ like Emma, beyond the surface of skin color” (46). “As the play  *Color Struck* proceeds,” Bower observes, “so does the anger, the low self-esteem, the paranoia, and finally the schizophrenia of Emma” (41). Allen notes that the play “is about an issue that challenges cooperative advancement: a couple is pulled apart by color politics . . . [resulting from the fact that] Emmaline internalizes messages that uplift whiteness” (121). At the same time, the uniting “structure of the ring dance [enacted on the train] contains what playwright August Wilson would call ‘two trains running,’ or the ability to foster personal dynamics and still maintain group directives by upholding a tradition that declares diversity” (132). Sandra Richards notes “the physical-psychological momentum of dance that gradually envelops all the characters in the construction of the community” that heightens “the inverse process by which Emmaline isolates herself and further internalizes a sense of racial inferiority” (78). David Krasner writes that “Emma turns against the big city. . . . Instead, she looks toward the provincial, inner world of her rural black community for spiritual sustenance. Yet her own community, as portrayed in the play, rejects Emma as well” (A Beautiful Pageant 123). For further discussion of the play, see Carson, Classon, Hill, North, Peters, and Plant.

24. Krasner also notes the ellipses, dashes, etc., seeing them as examples of Emma’s identity-fragmentation.

25. “Dance no less than song could become an instrument of satire at the expense of whites,” Levine points out, noting too that the “basic characteristics of American dance” differed from Europe-derived dances/dancers (16–17).

26. Staging again becomes important. It is difficult to imagine what sort of technology Graham imagined could make the mistletoe alight perfectly on the girl’s face. A director might choose to have it manipulated by a string or even by a character. If the white soldier were to be brought back on stage to manipulate the mistletoe, then the underlying irony of Emancipation’s ultimate disappointment could be well foregrounded.

27. This negative and oppressive aspect of silence is that which Jenny Sharpe
addresses in her essay “Unspeakable Limits of Rape: Colonial Violence and Counter-Insurgency.” In the plays that dealt with rape discussed earlier, silence was something that could be empowering, and Irigaray seizes upon silence as an important desirable thing in To Be Two, writing that “I find myself wondering whether the work of love that the book transmits has conveyed the fact that to love each other between us, woman and man, women and men, requires the protection of a space, a place of silence” (62). This space of silence “is at least three” (63), and Irigaray explains this “third space” (to evoke Bhabha) when she argues that two should strive for “perception” instead of “sensation” because where “perception can assist in the construction of intersubjectivity, sensation tends to erase one of the two subjects or reduce them both to a game between forces that are more or less individuated and controlled” (43). This perception establishes advantageous spaces, for through it “we can each become, the one for the other, a bridge towards a becoming which is yours, mine, and ours. I can be a bridge for you, as you can be one for me. This bridge can never become the property of either. The bridge which I am for you will never be mine or ‘to me.’ I perceive you, I create an idea of you, I preserve you in my memory—in affect, in thought—in order to assist you in your becoming. While I become me, I remember you. This should be a double gesture: you should be a bridge for me, as I should be one for you” (43). Thus, Irigaray writes, perceiving “you is a way of approaching us,” and “I who am visible to you must also protect a certain reserve. Within the intention of appearing to you, there must also exist the intention of remaining invisible, of covering life and love with the shadow of a secret. The eyes are a bridge between us, the gestures express a desire, but this shows itself by hiding itself” (47).

28. Mandy greatly resembles the sort of “Granny” healer-figure that Valerie Lee describes.

29. Again, a change from the source material—in this case, a true move to empower a black woman—for the real William himself got the clothes from different places in Savannah, Georgia. Mandy, here, colonizes her master’s clothes (fetish items for his body) to help Ellen pass.

30. Writing about Johnson’s lynching plays, Trudier Harris asserts that the “black female body in ill health . . . is not only a metaphor for American racism but a sympathetic response to the continuing destruction of the black male body” (“Before the Strength, the Pain” 40–41).

31. Stephens discusses the role of spirituals in these plays, but in light of Gussow’s argument, it seems just as vital to note the blues forms (see Stephens’s “Art, Activism, and Uncompromising Attitude in Georgia Douglas Johnson’s Lynching Plays” and “Politics and Aesthetics, Race and Gender: Georgia Douglas Johnson’s Lynching Dramas as Black Feminist Cultural Performance”).

32. Another part of the nuance of this version of the play is Johnson’s spelling “nurse” as “nuse,” which greatly resembles “noose,” which more accurately describes the inevitable effect of any contact with white people.

33. Derrida’s comments on “the safe” illumine the play’s closing in an interesting light. “Constructing a system of partitions,” he writes, “with their inner and outer surfaces, the cryptic enclave produces a cleft in space . . . . Within this forum, a place where the free circulation and exchange of objects and speeches can occur, the cryptic constructs another, more inward forum like a closed rostrum or speaker’s box, a safe: sealed, and thus internal to itself, a secret interior within the public square, but, by the same token, outside it, external to the interior . . . . The inner forum is (a) safe, an out-
cast outside inside the inside. That is the condition, and the stratagem, of the cryptic enclave's ability to isolate, to protect, to shelter from any penetration. . . . The crypt can constitute its secret only by means of its division, its fracture. 'I can save an inner safe only by putting it inside ‘myself,’ beside(s) myself, outside. What is at stake here is what takes place secretly, or takes a secret place, in order to keep itself safe somewhere in the self” (xiv).

34. For example, where And Yet They Paused keeps the white empowered space of congress invisible but audible, A Bill to Be Passed layers the invisible congressional proceedings with silence and the mediation of a black male voice. In addition to the essays on these plays by Stephens, see Perkins and Stephens’s introduction to Strange Fruit as well as Fletcher, O’Brien, and Sullivan.

35. The use of Thomas Jefferson's name suggests a famous “secret” of a man's begetting black children.

36. Bill Sturgeon, former editor of Elevator World: The Publisher for the International Building Transportation Industry, explains the role of the starter, writing that at the time of the play's action,

* Automatic Traffic Control had not been invented and all elevators had human operators. It was necessary to space the elevators in the shaft way for maximum efficiency and a “starter” was positioned in a lobby served by a bank of elevators. He would motion to one of the operators to start up to the top, or perhaps use a clicker. He was aware of when the maximum influx or exiting of the tenants took place and situated his elevators strategically to fill or empty the building expeditiously [sic]. Lunch time was another period when he was active in allocating elevator cars. Later, when the elevators were automatically spaced in the hoist way by computer and positions were pictured on the lobby main station he often was used to move people to the next available car so they would enter quickly. The starters represented the first impression upon visitors and wore a snappy uniform. It helped if he was good-natured!

37. Johnson's play is based on Douglass's writing that he “had a number of warm-hearted friends in Baltimore . . . and the thought of being separated from them forever was painful beyond expression” (Narrative 142) as well as his sending for and marrying Anna Murray, a free woman in Baltimore, once he has escaped to New York. Johnson does, however, take a number of liberties with the text that are worthy of note. First, she refers to Anna as “Ann” and identifies Douglass himself as “Fred Douglass,” whom she calls a “young slave man” (85). Her text is apocryphal, attempting to access Douglass before he was “Frederick Douglass” (as a matter of fact, Douglass makes no mention of having taken or even thought of taking the name “Douglass” before his escape from slavery).

38. Again, this story departs from Douglass's account. First, Douglass was at the time with Master Hugh Auld, not Tom Auld. Second, Douglass makes no mention himself of having withheld some of his funds from his master.

39. Upon first arriving in Baltimore, his master’s wife begins to teach him how to read and write but is soon forbidden by her husband to do so anymore. To counteract this move and learn the empowering secret of writing, Douglass famously tricks his white companions into teaching him how to write by asking them how to spell words and then copying them (a secrecy-move that will be discussed again later). His move is particularly interesting in light of Derrida’s discussion of Lévi-Strauss’s story about the
chief of the Nambikwara tribe, who, after watching Lévi-Strauss write, takes upon himself to draw lines on paper in order to show his subjects that he has mastered writing. They cannot read the writing to prove him wrong, but that does not matter because writing’s function goes far beyond expression or communication. Indeed, as Derrida writes, “since the Chief used writing effectively without knowing either the way it functioned or the content signified by it, the end of writing is political and not theoretical” (127). The chief’s utilization of inscription mystifies his power in an erasure that establishes a secret that controls his subjects, imitating the power of the center to strengthen his own reign.

40. Johnson creates these details partly from factual account and partly from imagination. As Douglass notes in Life and Times, a friend has provided him with a sailor’s suit and sailor’s protection (a paper describing his friend who did not even resemble Douglass). However, Douglass explains that he had neither train pass nor tickets but rather jumped on the train hoping his sailor protection paper would pass the conductor’s scrutiny, which it did.

41. The similarity of names and themes between this play and Color Struck are striking.

42. For discussion of the role of the goat in Greek drama, see Francisco R. Abrados’s Festival, Comedy and Tragedy: The Greek Origins of Theatre; Gerald F. Else’s The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy; John Ferguson’s A Companion to Greek Tragedy; A. W. Pickard’s Dithyramb Tragedy and Comedy; and Sir William Ridgeway’s The Origin of Tragedy.

43. Gubar writes regarding this situation that “[a]s a statement about the psychology of bondage, Hurston’s play suggests that paternal anxiety about potency as well as genealogical claims to legitimacy and property motivate racial subjugation. Laughing at the phallus is the outrage; disrespect for the father (even when the father has earned it) will be punished in the patri-linear, part-centered ancient world. Slavery or white supremacy is the result of the law of the (insecure, out-of-control) father outraged and determined to assert authority and control over his family, his property, and his future” (129).

44. Cora Bresciano, a student in one of my recent graduate seminars, has made the provocative suggestion that the actor portraying Ham might not look any different at all after the curse, thus highlighting race as a set of beliefs unconnected with biology.

45. John Lowe writes, “Two things are worth noting about this play. First is that the origin of a race is in its founding father’s joke. Second, the ending suggests that ‘The First [Black] One,’ a being who knows the true value of life, is superior to whites. Thus Hurston’s playlet both embraces and inverts the traditional interpretation of the biblical passage upon which it is based” (67).

46. I am indebted to Trevor W. McKeown, Curator of Library and Archives Board of Trustees, Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon, who was kind enough to inform me that the phrase “[r]iding the goat has been a jocular, and sometimes malicious, euphemism for masonic or fraternal initiation since at least the early 19th century and the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks are claimed by their current official historian, Mike Kelly, to have actually used a goat in their initiation from 1868 up until 1952.” In my earlier published treatment of this play, I assumed that a goat was being ridden in the offstage march later in the play, but, as McKeown has pointed out, it is not explicitly stated that a goat is used. It is likely a horse, although the possibility that the deception is carried out on the back of a goat would further develop the treatment of the goat-as-signifier in the play.
47. The stage directions describing the tomb note that “[o]ne instinctively thinks of ‘I dreamed I dwelt in marble halls’ and realizes that there is a new interpretation” (145).

48. Once again, it might be noted that in this context of lynching and conflict, the black speaker evokes the blues form, which Freddy King would later incorporate in his song, “I’m Tore Down,” which features the lines “I’m tore down / I’m almost level with the ground.” See Gussow for discussion of the implications of this line.


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