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Fantasizing a Free Black History: Post-Black Arts Movement Novels and Plays Re-Imagining Jim Crow

Wynter Lasterria

Novels and plays penned since Jim Crow about African Americans' segregation experiences often mirror the vernacular, structure, and content of life writing published during that era to demonstrate historical realism. And yet, a selection of these works that have come out after the Black Arts Movement (BAM) breaks from this realism, refusing to provide readers with a plausible or even self-contained fictional account of Black Jim Crow experiences. So why set the texts in Jim Crow America? Such drama and novels suggest that their import does not solely lie in how their authors make forms of racial prejudice and liberatory struggle tangible today. They also reimagine the *function* of African American historical discourse on freedom in literature: History must work around an obstruction to the full archive of past periods of life writing identified by scholars. For instance, Aida Levy-Hussen posits that the dialectic of "therapeutic" past-recovery and "prohibitive" anti-past-recovery reading methods reductively approaches the question of whether it is possible for the Black subject to access and share traumatic "memory," through the ages (25). Steven Best similarly "accepts the past's turning away" as an outcome of scholars' and artists' yearning for its recovery while doing archival research on Black art (20). Additionally, Wendy W. Walters unpacks neo-slave novels and poems of the last few decades and finds that exemplars like Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* and Elizabeth Alexander's "Amistad" present slave pasts that are not fully legible in their texts, with "imagining" what might have happened being the most fruitful solution to accessing that archive (65; 107).

Although the means for repurposing African American history differ, given the role of the novel reader versus the theatergoer in shaping these functions of Black history, a distinct subset of post-BAM Jim Crow-based novels and plays written since the 1980s both use two narration methods of addressing antebellum and Jim Crow period Black authors' concerns with African American historical representation. Reading Toni Morrison's 2003 novel *Love* alongside Lynn Nottage's 2011 play *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*, I find that both use overtly subjective, polysemic and self-censored diction, as well as collaborative authorship with their audiences. These two structures position the audiences to relate to Black individuals from Jim Crow as contemporary literary historical critics. Furthermore, both Morrison's novel and Nottage's play contain two narratives articulated by characters having lived in the Jim Crow era who have passed before the play's start and articulated by Black characters living in the twenty-first century. The two accounts in both works do not directly interact, and the ways in which the reader or audience member is called onto synthesize these storylines speaks to the power of non-linear, non-realist historical narratives to span Jim Crow era and present-day African American life. These tactics prompt readers to question if any one account of Jim Crow era Black life emerging from the literary archive could manifest Black individuals' agential subject

statuses under Jim Crow to audiences today. I argue that these Jim Crow-set fictions replace the inaccessible historical archive in Black literature with a liberatory concept of Black history as a creative practice, as readers imagine with characters and the contemporary authors how Jim Crow period Black individuals may have articulated their own freedom notwithstanding archival suppression reflecting legalized racism in the U.S.

Making History with The Reader In *Love*

Toni Morrison's novel *Love* contains several narrations from different characters, and shifts narration across time periods often to disrupt readers' sense of familiarity with any of the narrators. Together, all the narrative accounts follow the current and Jim Crow era residents of the famed black East coast beachside Cosey Hotel, which was founded and run during the 1960s by Black entrepreneur Bill Cosey with the assistance of his daughter, May, and cook, L. The now-deceased L comprises part of the narrative in ghostly italics, while a supposedly living third-person omniscient individual narrates the other part, and that person also explores the perspectives of May, Bill's granddaughter, Christine, and Christine's friend and Bill's child bride, Heed the Night. The setting shifts between flashbacks to the 1960s, which L often narrates, where readers learn about Cosey's sexual predation on Heed at age eleven, and the post-Jim Crow and post-Black Arts Movement 1990s, where readers see an estranged Heed and Christine return to the hotel to vie for Cosey's inheritance. As Katrina Harack notes, the fact that L is both omniscient and omnipresent and yet passes judgment on Cosey and punishes him encourages readers to take a similar approach and reassess the family's Jim Crow past in a way that serves readers today (272). Thus, L's perspective as a ghost separated from living characters highlights a generational divide in knowledge of Jim Crow Black life between African Americans who lived during Jim Crow and those who came immediately after. She even calls attention to how the young generation today does not inquire what her name is after some initial misnomers, paired with the fact that she never bothers to tell readers; this suggests an irretrievable loss of her past identity through literature even as she is narrating it to us (65). Despite L's access to each character through her memory and hauntings, she intentionally withholds information about their Jim Crow pasts. By doing this, L communicates to the reader a literary archival obscurity that fiction may be uniquely positioned to circumvent.

From L's contradictory hints at narrations she then conceals, questions emerge for the reader trying to make meaning of the narrative she does give: what does the separation of L's commentary in the present day and her focus on the Jim Crow period of the 1920s suggest about the two generations' different modes of writing a liberated Black self? What does the reader gain when Morrison both intertwines but also intermittently disperses both periods of time across several narratives? L calling attention to the lack of present-day knowledge about her life during Jim Crow immediately suggests her fixation on presenting a subsequent narrative that will reach a contemporary audience with an emancipatory historical practice that they are not seeking. L's obscurity indicates that depicting her lived experiences reliably and accurately for all posterity is not a literary practice readily available to working class Black women like her during Jim Crow. By coaxing readers to create her story around the parts she withholds or does not know, L also hints that creating narratives that imagine Jim Crow era African Americans' presence possessing readers today can be an alternate historical account. In her historical

narration in which she speculates and encourages readers' speculation, Black subjects who have freed themselves from Jim Crow's social confines become more apparent to post-BAM era readers—particularly those born after de jure segregation.

Although L and the third-person narrator jump around in time and place, they do cohere overall in their representations of the wills and values of the characters, particularly in portraying Cosey as a Black agent of white patriarchal supremacy in America during Jim Crow. As L suggests in her indirect characterization of Cosey's authority, he was tyrannical: "If I was a servant in that place, May was its slave. Her whole life was making sure those Cosey men had what they wanted" (102). L's depiction of her and May's coerced subservience to different degrees exposes that Cosey ruled as a land-owning patriarch, tied to the white American model of "slave[ry]" (102). L continues vilifying Cosey indirectly by delving into his daughter May's inner thoughts after Cosey takes his child bride Heed, her daughter Christine's former playmate:

May's new mother-in-law was not just a child, she was a Johnson. In no wild dream could she have invented a family that scared her more. The fool on German Syrup labels. The savage on Czar's Baking Powder. The brain-dead on Alden's Fruit Vinegar, Korn Kinks Cereal, J.J. Coates Thread, and the fly-blown babies on Sanford's Ginger. That's who she saw when she looked at the Johnsons. (138)

May reduces the Johnson family members to unintelligent, servile, and offensively stereotypical African American minstrel characters used to advertise various commercial products. While this criticism appears to suggest May opposes anti-Blackness and wants to refute these racist characters, she takes a classist, anti-Black position. Reading Christine and May's disgust with the Johnsons as class and racially based aligns with J. Brooks Bouson's reading of how "patriarchy" in the novel fosters "exclusionary politics of class and caste in the black community" (360; 373). To this I add that Christine's judgment mimics a historicization in American literature that facilitates the primacy of white American bourgeois culture at the expense of exploring and representing the breadth and depth of Black culture during Jim Crow to those living thereafter.

However, L, as an omniscient and timeless ghost, is also able to establish a distance between her own opinions and May's articulating how Black women like L transcended white upper-middle class patriarchal hegemony during Jim Crow. L then states that those stereotypes are "who *she* [May] saw" the Johnsons as being (138, emphasis added). The abundant pronouns referring to May and emphasis on her gaze suggest two things. First, that the anti-Black stereotyping is a viewpoint specific to May, and second, that it is a superficial, external, and incomplete assessment of the Johnsons viewing them as objects. May's assumption that she is a complete subject given her belonging to the property-owning class leads her to see the Johnsons as less-than-free human subjects, whom she can gaze upon and definitively claim in her own language (138). L's retrospection exposes the subjective lapses in May's narration, but L does not also provide her own supplementary views of the Johnsons; L's withdrawal here suggests that the reader will have to work with L and the third-person narrator to imagine the lives of the Black individuals who defied economic and social discrimination under Jim Crow.

As L's narration continues, she not only depicts how Cosey, May, and Christine's narratives represent a whitewashed account of the poor black experience during Jim Crow. However, she also exposes the gaps in her *own* knowledge, despite being timeless. L's omnipresence combined with her obvious lack of complete knowledge prompts readers to reconsider the purpose of novels in crafting a mosaic of narratives on past Black life to *invent* history across generations:

Mr. Cosey wanted children. Well, that's what he told his friends and maybe himself. But not me. He never told that to me because I had worked for him since I was fourteen and knew the truth. He liked her.... That was the truth, but not all of it. I remember him telling me a tale about some child who fell down in horse manure running after a posse and how the white folks laughed ... so I supposed the point was he laughed too and apologized for it by marrying Heed. (139)

L exposes Cosey for withholding his true motives to avoid looking predatory, and acknowledges her own bias but still includes her own opinions, all while questioning what is the truth. Cosey's grooming actions of a poor dark-skinned Black girl speak to his harmful perpetuation of white-based patriarchy that scholars have also traced. James M. Mellard finds that Cosey represents "not only the traditional role of the Symbolic father but also the roles of the two other figures of the father—ordinary versus obscene—associated with what Zizek calls the bourgeois father of postmodernism" (240). Mary Panicia Carden has likewise suggested that Morrison investigates Cosey's persona to reveal that contemporary America places "success in an idealized fatherhood" that is colorist, classist, and sexist (131-33). However, as L continues, her exposé gets increasingly obscure, which complicates her quest for truth. On the one hand, she demonstrates a certain level of knowledge by stating that Cosey never gave her his rationale for marrying Heed, and yet she still knows the facts about why he did. On the other hand, she still suggests that knowing this fact despite information being withheld from her does not yield her the whole "truth" (139). This dichotomy prompts readers to examine the difference between knowing facts and the truth, and how it shapes how one creates a historical narrative. L stating that even what she reveals about Cosey's lust fails to capture the entire "truth" makes it clear that her narrative is skewed and incomplete (139). Given that the American patriarchal social model enshrines Cosey's mundane and grotesque predations in official accounts, L must account for their role in Jim Crow practices of harming black women and girls with speculations that subvert this order.

Moreover, L suggests that *no* singular person can provide a narrative of this past that would correct Cosey's and fully restore the literary archive to an objective history. For example, L claims that Cosey did not just pick a young bride to have more heirs but also because he possessed a lechery for young flesh, which L suggests she might have also experienced working for him at age "fourteen" (139). However, she never outright says she was also a survivor of his inappropriate advances, and she uses her subjective narrative to grant herself power and avoid being characterized as a victim by creating doubt regarding what happened to her. Being purposely unclear about how well acquainted L is with Cosey's deviance allows L to create a narrative that does not view her, Heed, or Black working-class women like them as the subservient property of the land-owning wealthy patriarchy. In this moment, L practices what

Stephanie Li identifies as “Morrison’s exploration of how semiotic impulses can be mapped onto language [, which] demonstrates the need for a mode of communication that moves beyond the engrained dichotomies and antagonists of gender associated with the symbolic power to name and categorize” (28). Moreover, L’s opinionated testimony on the taunted child as a symbol allows her and other black women to be survivors, agents, and subjects in their own right with their own observations to communicate. She makes it clear to the reader that while the historical account of what happened will never be complete, no matter who tells it, these characters’ liberation can emerge from readers acknowledging these accounts as fiction and piecing them together to speculate an overarching account of the Jim Crow past.

As L then offers her own imagination of why Cosey married Heed, she simultaneously demonstrates how Cosey’s explanation is analogous to how white supremacy has shaped Black history, and models how readers can make fiction to reconsider Heed’s history as a cross-generational and freeing creative process. L states that Cosey probably once laughed along with a group of white people following the public humiliation of a Black child, and that this group likely supported a lynch mob, but it is uncertain what this “posse” is to contemporary readers (Morrison 139). Given the fact that Cosey laughs with what is *possibly* but not certainly a lynch mob’s white supporters further suggests that his narrative of marrying a dark-skinned girl like Heed to correct this previous racist error is a ruse. If L is using Cosey’s own noun “posse” to describe the group or convey the tone in which he described them, his ambiguous noun choice implies that he denies or downplays their racialized brutality (139). Cosey’s probable choice of language in this vignette is violence done unto the Black child in his story, Heed, L, and other poor dark-skinned Black women like them, as it downplays the indignities and life-threatening dangers they have faced under Jim Crow. L again uses polysemic word choice to hint at Cosey’s true predatory nature that perpetuates white patriarchal systemic authority, while asserting her own authority as someone able to compel the reader to imagine his unspoken violence with her diction. Cosey’s recollection demonstrates how African American historical accounts can be perpetuated in service of upper-class white male hegemony from Jim Crow onward. Correspondingly, L’s cross-period presence, opinionated tone, and selective diction expose the fictiveness she sees inherent in history and models how readers and authors can harness that fictive quality to instead create an inclusive and empowering Black history.

Actor-Audience-Historian Role Playing In *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*

A subset of African American plays written in the three decades following the end of the BAM have also sought the historical ends of Black novelists like Morrison to involve audiences in writing a Jim Crow past that also speaks to present-day Black life. One such play that epitomizes this historical approach is Lynn Nottage’s *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*, written in 2011, but set in the 1930s Jim Crow years, and also depicting slave life in a film within the play. The play shifts within each act from the oldest of the three time periods toward the most current, opening in 1933 with the titular character Vera Stark working as a maid for a white actress named Gloria. Vera compels Gloria to audition for the lead in a new antebellum period film *The Belle of New Orleans* so that Vera can audition for the slave role. Toward the end of the play, the setting jumps ahead to 2003, when three cultural critics of color take the stage to unpack the legacy of Vera’s film performance and her relationship with jazz musician Leroy Barksdale. In describing

Vera's life, the critic characters take the play's audience members, whom they address as viewers of their panel, through a series of videotaped television interviews of Vera from 1973.

Given the presence of a fake film, fake television interviews, and a fake colloquium within the play, concentric performances of Black history that are both hyper-visible and partially concealed proliferate in the dramatic production. Nottage even developed two websites ostensibly created by two of the cultural critic characters in the play: MeetVeraStark.com and FindingVeraStark.com. While they are no longer operational, they speak to Nottage's desire to initially appear to replicate realistic historical digital archives for members of the internet age, and anticipate the desire her playgoers would have for a direct access to Jim Crow Black history via her play. Yet, the existence of the play itself also reveals that the digital archive is incomplete, and the links' eventual obsolescence proves that same point; Nottage finds watching the enactments of Jim Crow historical events and present-day historical analysis in the play necessary to understand how this Black history can be shared for individuals living after the Black Power movement. Nottage also states in the casting directions that each of the actors playing roles during the first act taking place in 1933, besides those playing Vera and Gloria, must also play one of the other television personalities or cultural critics set in 1973 and 2003, respectively. Such double-casting also creates associations between characters played by the same actor in the minds of audience members, which suggests that Nottage's project aims to make viewers see history as a process that gets reinvented. Considering that Nottage has this nesting-doll structure of African American performative art and performance studies within a historical play, it is clear that she sets her audience up for a meta-critique on the natures of these public displays and what they reveal about how Black history is and can be told. Audience members of the past thirty years approach Jim Crow Black history distinctly when it is openly enacted instead of just privately written and read. Certain post-BAM playwrights like Nottage can manipulate their audiences' role as spectators to shape their views of Black history from Jim Crow back to slavery. It is therefore productive to inquire what views of free Black subjects audiences gain when looking at different levels of public *performances* of Jim Crow history in plays separately from novels.

Nottage demonstrates to her audience members how she writes a model of creative dramatic history with them through her character Mr. Slasvick, the director of *The Belle of New Orleans*. He depicts his rationale for pursuing this film with a nostalgic tone:

People want to laugh, they want to cry and they want a little song-and-dance in between. And I don't think that's so fucking awful. But the one thing they don't want is to feel bad about themselves. Not now, not while the economy is dying and good folks are being forced out of their homes and into the fucking gutter. People need the past, need their history to seem heroic, glorious and romantic.... And let's face it, slavery isn't exactly a pick-me-up. All I'm asking is that if you're gonna give 'em slaves, give 'em happy ones. (50)

Maximilian's explanation for a jovial portrayal of slave life appears to be specific to the difficult financial climate of the 1930s, but actually speaks to the early 2000s audience for the play in a way that connects his portrayal of Jim Crow history to portrayals of Black life in the new millennium. This play, which debuted in 2011, took place in an American cultural moment still

reeling from the 2008 financial crisis, which also saw people losing their “homes” and jobs (Nottage 50). Nottage employs what Julia Jarcho sees in Samuel Beckett’s work as a postmodern theatrical temporalization, in which “theater manifests the experience of life lived as an absolute present, or as *drama*; but it exceeds drama by exposing this experience in light of what it doesn’t contain” (97). Applying Jarcho’s findings to Nottage, Slasvick’s broad historical reference to “econom[ic]” disaster invokes the cultural circumstances of the playgoers, making it apparent as an enduring occurrence (50). Nottage establishes the romanticization of oppressed Black individuals to mitigate these financial woes as an “absolute present” condition, while also hinting at how this condition grossly misrepresents subjugated Black figures (97). Accordingly, Nottage’s gesture to her contemporary social circumstances leads audience members to consider how Slasvick’s representation is the ongoing way that white artists curating popular American culture have justified portraying the subjective concept that is history in a way that absolves white Americans of any blame. The audience is called upon to ponder how history has consistently been manipulated, as each era calls for it to promote anti-Blackness and white saviorhood. This fictive film rationale encourages everyone watching to re-interpret this history Slasvick has made in the Jim Crow era. Like L’s exposé of Cosey’s true motivations in *Love*, Slasvick’s monologue here reveals how all historical renderings of the past, even those housed in popularly-sanctioned spaces like Hollywood theaters, are partial. And yet, Slasvick states that people only need their past insofar as they need it to “seem” a certain way (50). Like Vera’s comment on the “picture” that the film is, Slasvick similarly suggests that history is only accessible to people partially if people consider it as a set of materials like a film or photograph at which future generations can glimpse (50). Therefore, Slasvick’s romanticism and Vera’s subversive performativity together imply that Vera will include personal performances that take advantage of the inventive storytelling inherent in history to create it anew with and for later generations. *This* is the way of creating a narrative thread that confers power to Black people from slavery to Jim Crow to now.

As Vera tries out for the role of slave character Tilly in the film, she further demonstrates that this cinematographic way of presenting antebellum history as the past completely revived for Jim Crow Americans is reductive and unfeasible, and requires giving history a new function in slave narratives. In order to even get the opportunity to act, Vera has to act as if her real life mirrors the slave role. She has to pretend that she is a poor housekeeper from the South one step removed from slavery as she auditions, code-switching into a dialect and blues singing, she must completely invent based on white stereotypes of uneducated rural southern Black people to deliver a sense of authenticity the film’s white director and writer strive to portray (47-48). On the one hand, the audience, already aware of Vera’s background and manner of speech, can readily identify this as a performance within a performance. On the other hand, the fact that they are portrayals alone, regardless of their accuracy, speaks to an impediment to free Black representation in history that is not easily remedied. Vera is distancing the audience from the conceit of the play, similar to how scholar Malik Gaines has noted that some Jim Crow era Black performance artists such as Nina Simone did with the audiences to their works (34). Vera delivers an overtly false affective performance to dispel any audience members’ misconceptions of the enactment’s legitimacy, which compels viewers to consider how a Black woman in Jim Crow can publicly display Blackness for her contemporaries and later generations in an agential way.

Given the double-inauthenticity upon which Tilly's character is based and the geographical and temporal distance Vera has from rural southern slave life, viewers understand that there is no way to satisfy the white producers' aims of bringing narratives from these slaves into the future, however false they may be. When Vera's audition compels her to sing a blues song, there is a point at which she can no longer improvise a tune; she stops and lies, saying, "I can't, no, it too painful. It dun take me home, and home ain't someplace dat so easy to be" (48). This expression conveys dual meanings to the audience. First, Vera's immediate personal "home" is too distant from the Antebellum South to be authentically related (48). Furthermore, if one considers her "home" in the broader sense to be many African Americans' origins in the slave-holding south, Vera's comment also reveals she is too distant in time and space to access it (48). Antebellum history "ain't someplace dat so easy to be" because the filmmakers are attempting to mine the past in its totality and realism as if Vera were an archive (48). Meanwhile, Vera is suggesting this history is not a place or person where complete narratives can be found and restored during Jim Crow, let alone thereafter. Vera also hints that the film producers' realist approach to "finding" and representing history also applies to presenting the *Jim Crow* past within this play to the post-millennium audience. She fails to provide a performance here that reproduces the slave experience, but what she does perform here, despite its fabricated nature, indicates a way of imagining what the slave and Jim Crow Black pasts *may have been* that offers an interactive African American history for audience members of the 2010s onward.

When Vera pretends to live a slave-adjacent life while auditioning, Nottage inserts detailed stage directions to suggest Vera's actor's embodiment of that imaginative performance is what creates this false antebellum history. This open-ended corporeal instruction invites the audience to imagine what she is thinking and how they must interpret her enactment. In fact, as soon as Vera and her friend Lottie encounter the film's director and writer and overhear their expressed desire to cast "real" oppressed Black women, Nottage indicates that "*Vera and Lottie slowly shift their posture, auditioning for the role of slaves*" and that they gradually "*... continue to morph into slave women*" (46). In Nottage's view, it is the act of them assuming the physical stance of those whom white people imagine as slaves that puts them in the position of "auditioning" more than anything they could possibly say (46). Nottage makes the core elements of Vera's transfiguration into slavery bodily and does so with vague instructions, such that every actor taking on the role of Vera and Lottie must decide for herself what "morph[ing] into slave women" looks and sounds like (46). Additionally, the fact that Vera's actions speak louder than any words would demonstrate Nottage's perceived limits to literary texts' ability to fully document antebellum and Jim Crow African American life to viewers now, many of whom may not have lived through either era.

The audience is compelled to realize that if they have any desire to see this play to actually receive realistic Black narratives from Jim Crow or slavery like Slasvick's character does, it cannot be fulfilled. Rather than articulate how the actor playing Vera's should embody a slave stereotype, Nottage puts the actor in the position of Vera herself, pushing the actor to imagine how to enact a false representation of slave life within Jim Crow Black life as it would appear to a person in the 2010s or sometime thereafter. Aimee Zygmanski has meaningfully analyzed the historic narrative that results from this set of performances placed within one another: She observes that Vera embodies the Black diasporic trickster archetype and uses the "satirical

technique of polyvocality” to demonstrate how an amalgamation of harmful Black typecasts has shaped how Black people have defined themselves over time (202). However, this reading does not account for whether or how these representations alter the relationship between fiction and history. Nottage models through the actor how antebellum and Jim Crow history must be a fictionalizing process that invents a narrative of the past with those attempting to access it in the post-BAM decades. Then, the audience must interpret the actor’s behaviors as specific choices to represent a stereotypical slave. The stage directions then indicate that as she tears up in this moment: “*She’s giving a performance of a lifetime*” (48). Rather than stating Vera is giving *the* “performance of” *her* “lifetime,” the ambiguous “a” alienates Vera from this generic enacted life—it is not her life to authentically access or share with Slasvick or the audience (48). Viewers and Vera’s actor learn through this farce that historical restoration is not possible for them through realist historical fiction. This connotes that in order for both Jim Crow and Antebellum period subjugated Black individuals to be salient to viewers, they must fill in the blanks themselves.

That said, the audience is not just resigned to remaking history in Slasvick’s white, cisgender and heteronormative male image. Nottage also modifies performance tactics used by African American Jim Crow era artists to covertly articulate Vera’s Blackness. Soyica Diggs Colbert makes a similar observation that Nottage shows through Vera’s acting that the Black image is not only shaped by how Black people choose to represent themselves, but also stagnant “racial fantasies,” which inherently cause us to depart from “linear time” (402-3). Black performance as Colbert defines it is an approximation of previous iterations of Blackness designed to establish a sense of seamless “identity” today that can jump over rifts between current and past embodiments of Blackness (402). This connection for Colbert links the lived experiences of slavery and Jim Crow discrimination for post-BAM audiences, despite the fact that, as Colbert notes, the play is abruptly shifting between these time periods (403). Reframing Colbert’s analysis to account for how the actor playing Vera influences this temporal awareness and whether these performances alter the nature of that history, a liberatory viewing or reading practice emerges for theatergoers. As the actor makes an obvious attempt to invent the blues for the playgoers, these viewers are encouraged to imagine the depth of both Vera’s and her actor’s creativity, intellect, and physical and verbal self-control to manipulate the precise representation of slavery that Vera’s white audience seeks, centralizing the stereotypical and “real” Black women’s wills and perspectives in this fictive storytelling process.

Nottage’s decision to have the actor improvise underscores the communal construction of Blackness reflected in literature on any given period, always mediated by contingencies. In a related performance analysis, Tracey L. Walters notes that Vera’s acting shows that race is a publicly negotiated identity that is constantly shifting in response to our environment both inside media and outside it (113). Applying Walters’ reading to the stereotypical narrative, Vera *and Vera’s actor* willfully craft only in part and in farce; their performances allow the *authentic* Black past from slavery to Jim Crow to be what Vera, her actor, and the audience infer and conjecture it to be beyond what they witness. Although viewers see Vera feign subservience in the audition and movie, they also imagine how, outside of the film, she is maintaining a public identity for Black women of resilience against the film’s portrayal of slaves and subversiveness that is strong enough for her to achieve socioeconomic mobility. As the audience sees more in Act Two, Vera also gains a political platform through which she and the audience can further

promote possible freeing narratives regarding what African American lives from Jim Crow and earlier could have been. Like L's vague narrations of her and Cosey's personal histories in *Love*, Nottage conceives a corresponding mode of performing African American historical literature in which history is the process of making a Black-centered personal narrative created *with* a post-BAM audience. The viewers participating with Vera in understanding her slave character create a Black history narrative that links Black strength, survival and freedom despite institutionalized oppression from slavery to segregation. It bridges a generational divide with Americans living decades if not centuries later.

Morrison And Nottage: Remaking History to Re-Present The Past

African American fiction writers of the past three decades following the BAM are still connected to the Jim Crow experiences of African Americans through the living individuals who experienced it firsthand and several Jim Crow era Black autobiographies or other historical accounts that are widely disseminated in classrooms and housed in archival collections today. However, in the past thirty years, a group of novelists and playwrights have created works that initially purport to reveal to post-BAM audiences the truth about Jim Crow Black life as Black individuals self-identified it, only to deliberately obstruct the reader from these complete observations. Such novels, exemplified by *Love*, have narrators like L, who implies that she cannot fully unpack for her readers the inner workings of Cosey's patriarchal system that replicates the racism, colorism, sexism, and classism Jim Crow laws enforced (Morrison 139). L demonstrates that direct speech from those who lived then and now is inaccessible to current readers. Such plays, epitomized by dramas like *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*, have overtly inauthentic speech and song and intentionally ambiguous stage directions that emphasize what Black Jim Crow era speakers cannot fully articulate to audience members regarding the former's true intentions when representing themselves in art. In both fictions, each speaker's questions about the full transparency of their own account of the Jim Crow past undermine the realist ideal often governing readers' expectations for historical fiction and propose that history is a process of fiction writing in itself.

Love and *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark* use an omniscient or omnipresent fictional narrator depicting Jim Crow Black life, in order to show that even they still cannot make those experiences visible to individuals living thereafter. If history as an archival site of the whole truth about past Black subjects conveyed through literature is not entirely legible to the generations living after these times, making history a way to creatively rewrite the past into the post-BAM moment allows these elder Black voices to reemerge. Moreover, this attempt grants audiences today access to these voices, demonstrating how antebellum and Jim Crow period Black individuals empowered themselves notwithstanding legalized systemic racism and its white-privileging effects on canonized American literature. History for this subset of African American novelists and playwrights is inextricably linked with fiction writing, as both become one means for transmitting liberating Black experiences—both private and public—from slavery and Jim Crow to readers and viewers of the last thirty years.

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