

Teaching *The Colored Museum* and Its Doubles: Black Queer Theatrical Aesthetics in *Bootycandy* and *Ain't No Mo'*

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ABSTRACT: *George C. Wolfe's The Colored Museum is one of the most significant experimental theatre texts of the post-Civil Rights era. The play's impact on the contemporary dramaturgical imagination is perhaps best measured by and reflected in the various works it has inspired in recent years. For several contemporary Black playwrights, Wolfe's complex structure, characterization, and plotting have served as vital springboards for crafting their own formally and thematically inventive scripts. Teaching Robert O'Hara's Bootycandy (2011) and Jordan E. Cooper's Ain't No Mo' (2019) in conversation with Wolfe's foundational play proves particularly generative for contemplating the ways a spirit of experimentation continues to vitalize Black cultural production in the twenty-first century. This article reflects on my pedagogical approach to analyzing The Colored Museum and its contemporary doubles with students, highlighting some of the insights that doing so has revealed about the artistic and ideological sensibilities suffusing post-Civil Rights African-American drama and theatre. I focus on the nuanced conversations about Black queer theatrical aesthetics that exploring Wolfe, O'Hara, and Cooper's plays enables and engenders in the classroom. I also demonstrate how teaching these plays creates rich opportunities to introduce students to some of the key concepts and ideas animating queer studies while also enriching their understanding of African American dramatic literature as a crucial site of knowledge production and aesthetic and cultural disruption.*

KEYWORDS: *drama pedagogy, The Colored Museum, George C. Wolfe, Robert O'Hara, Jordan E. Cooper*

Though it is seldom heralded as such, I teach George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* as one of the most significant experimental theatre texts of the post-Civil Rights era in my courses on African American drama and theatre. While Black scholars and critics have long written about how the play's

premiere at New Jersey's Crossroads Theatre Company in 1986 served as a watershed moment for the history and trajectory of African American drama, most studies aimed at documenting and examining the efforts of playwrights to embrace the unexpected and delight in the unorthodox in their work rarely mention it. The persistence of this oversight remains both peculiar and perplexing to me. Perhaps the success that Wolfe has enjoyed writing, directing, and producing for the commercial stage – and for the big and small screens – over his decades-long career has made some wary of counting him among the most cutting-edge theatre makers of recent decades. His frequent movements across roles, genres, and mediums and his unique engagements with a remarkably broad range of aesthetic practices and strategies surely render tidily characterizing or narrating his artistic journey and contributions difficult. Still, there is little doubt that, at least with regard to his dramatic writing, Wolfe has demonstrated a longstanding commitment to defying theatrical conventions, tastes, and expectations. Not only does he inaugurate this commitment with *The Colored Museum*, but he also provides rich textual evidence of the ways the play might be drawn upon to create fresh possibilities for dramaturgical and theatrical innovation. As he explained in a 1993 interview with literary scholar Charles H. Rowell, “I wrote that play so that I could write any other play I wanted” (619). To have Wolfe tell it, he conceived *The Colored Museum* as a kind of clarion call to chart out and pursue what fellow writer Suzan-Lori Parks describes as “BLACK PEOPLE + X = NEW DRAMATIC CONFLICT (NEW TERRITORY)” (20) from the very beginning.

The Colored Museum has accumulated a strong following since its Reagan-era debut, regularly appearing on course syllabi and on the stages of colleges, universities, and regional theatres throughout the United States, for example. However, this ostensible “approval” has often served to obscure much of the controversy the work sparked among its earliest audiences and critics. Some initial viewers found the play's unconventional form and irreverent content so unsettling that they attempted to organize boycotts against it and its creator. Wolfe has suggested that much of the negative criticism directed at the play early on stemmed from jealousy and a desire among some to gatekeep what they were eager and inclined to promote as “authentic” Black artistic expression and cultural production. Given all the jockeying to renegotiate the meanings of Blackness and to develop a distinctly “Black aesthetic” that unfolded in the aftermath of the liberation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, this certainly accounts for the unease the work produced among some. Just as much of the criticism might be attributed to the willingness Wolfe displays in the work to experimenting with structure and style while making bold claims about and offering sharp critiques of aspects of the Black past and present previously thought to be off limits. That Wolfe was deploying parody

and satire to convey his often-biting commentary on Black history, life, and culture only served to intensify the suspicion and ire shared by many of the play's early detractors.¹

Undoubtedly distinguishing *The Colored Museum* as a major turning point in twentieth-century experimental drama and theatre is the audacity with which Wolfe confronts Black life matters – and asks audiences to do the same. This aesthetic and theatrical risk-taking is also what marks the play as a potent resource for wrestling and reckoning with broader questions and themes about Black history, culture, and identity with students. Scholars Brandi Wilkins Catanese, Christina Knight, Harry J. Elam, Jr., and Charles I. Nero have been especially instrumental in helping me explicate some of the narrative and dramaturgical devices that Wolfe deploys to make powerful interventions on these fronts when teaching the play. Catanese, for example, argues that Wolfe “creates an important discursive space for the cataloguing of African-American history” in his plotting and, in doing so, presents characters that “resist the narrow strictures of the histories they have inherited and create complex alternatives for themselves, devising pasts that imply the present and futures that they would like to inhabit” (15). Knight builds on Catanese’s observations in her critical examination of the ways the play interrogates the legacy and wound of slavery, noting that Wolfe “argues for the importance of ‘claiming’ historical injury for blacks” while, at the same time, exploring “the difficulty and psychic pain involved” in confronting this legacy (355). Elam, who was among the earliest scholars to write about the play, praises both it and Wolfe for talking back to “earlier African-American dramatic texts, critiquing and revising central themes, images and narrative strategies,” while also encouraging audiences “to recognize and accept the contradictions and complexities of African-American culture” (291). Nero notably situates Wolfe within a cohort of late 1980s and early 1990s Black queer writers whose experimentations with what he theorizes as a “black gay aesthetic” served to counter the racist and heterosexist ideologies that “resulted in [Black] gay male experience being either excluded, marginalized, or ridiculed” in African American cultural production (229). What turning attention to the existing scholarship on the play serves to highlight for students are the ways that Wolfe shrewdly exploits the possibilities of live theatre to challenge prevailing historical, cultural, and dramaturgical assumptions and to invite spectators and readers to reimagine their worlds more expansively. This pedagogical choice also allows me, much like Nero, to position Wolfe within a robust genealogy of insurgent Black writers and theatre makers that includes many of the cultural workers that *The Colored Museum* sends up in and across its various “exhibits.”

Of course, as with most dramas that premiered before they were born, students are usually quite keen to discuss the relevance of *The Colored Museum*

to their twenty-first-century experiences and contexts. One notable way that I have come to evidence for them the play's continued influence and impact on the contemporary dramaturgical imagination is by assigning them two more recent works, which Wolfe's earlier text directly inspired, to read during the term. For several contemporary Black playwrights, *The Colored Museum's* complex structure, characterization, and plotting have served as vital springboards for crafting their own formally and thematically inventive scripts. Wolfe's engagements with what I, following Nero, have come to think of as *Black queer theatrical aesthetics* in the play have likewise proven creatively galvanizing. Teaching Robert O'Hara's *Bootycandy* (2011) and Jordan E. Cooper's *Ain't No Mo'* (2019) in conversation with Wolfe's foundational play has been particularly generative for contemplating the ways a spirit of experimentation continues to vitalize African American drama. Wolfe, O'Hara, and Cooper all identify as Black gay men, and each offers up compelling representations of Black queer life and experience in their respective bodies of work. Given this, I encourage students to think about how Black queerness perhaps figures into and influences the form and content of their plays. I also invite them to contemplate what the plays perhaps reveal about the relationship between Black queerness and contemporary Black theatrical and aesthetic practices.

This article reflects on this pedagogical approach, highlighting some of the insights it has surfaced about the artistic and ideological sensibilities suffusing post-Civil Rights African American drama. It sharpens particular focus on the nuanced conversations about Black queer theatrical aesthetics that analysing *Bootycandy* and *Ain't No Mo'* in concert with *The Colored Museum* often enables and engenders for students. By guiding students through close examinations of these three plays, I endeavour to introduce them to some of the key terms and ideas animating (Black) queer studies and to create opportunities for them to engage the field critically. I also aim to enrich their understandings of African American dramatic literature as a crucial site of knowledge production and social, cultural, and aesthetic disruption. In what follows, I detail how teaching *The Colored Museum* and its more contemporary doubles becomes an important catalyst for getting students to make important connections and discoveries across course content, classroom discussions, and their quotidian experiences.

Plotting Black Queer Theatrical Aesthetics

Because students are often eager to share what they find compelling and/or challenging about a script, I like to launch most class conversations by inviting them to comment on their initial affective responses to the text under consideration. In addition to giving me a clearer sense of what resonated for them, this also allows me to gain a better understanding of the questions they

would like to address collectively. I use these questions to guide our discussions. When teaching *The Colored Museum*, *Boyt candy*, and *Ain't No Mo'*, I also find it productive to have students share thoughts and ideas about some of the key concepts that I hope will ground our analysis. I do this both to build trust among the group and to foster opportunities for peer learning. This also gives the class a chance to assess their common knowledge of the concepts that will structure our conversations: queerness and aesthetics among them. The ultimate objective is for the class to establish a set of criteria and/or parameters for thinking about, recognizing, and assessing what we might mean by Black queer theatrical aesthetics.

This necessarily requires examining some of the ways that others have defined and engaged with these concepts. We begin these conversations by considering the evolutions of the term *queer*. I detail how, while the word was once used as an epithet for same-sex desiring individuals and as a slang term for homosexuals, activist groups such as ACT UP and its offshoot Queer Nation began reappropriating and finding new uses for it in the late 1980s and early 1990s.² Within these activist circles and contexts, *queer* came to signify a radical disruption to compulsory heterosexuality, white supremacy, and patriarchy. This inevitably raises questions about how much the term's revolutionary potential perhaps lies in its capaciousness. To consider this, I turn to the work of E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, who explain that while an essentialist identitarian politics centred on speaking to, against, and on behalf of the oppression of sexual rebels initially undergirded queer activism, scholarship, and discourse, important interventions made by feminist theorists of various backgrounds broadened the term's uses and its analytic reach (5). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's introduction to *Tendencies* serves to underscore this claim by explaining that *queer* can refer to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically" (8, emphasis in original). Sedgwick goes on to offer that *queer* can also mean something entirely different: "[A] lot of the most exciting recent work around 'queer' spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and *other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example" (8–9, emphasis in original). Critical to this elaboration of *queer* is a foregrounding of justice. Intellectuals and artists alike, Sedgwick observes, use the leverage of *queer* to do "a new kind of justice" to the complexities of everyday life (9). I ask students to consider how mobilizing *queer*, then, can open space for what we might think of as "just" engagements, the purposes of which are not to discipline, contain, or control, but instead to resist the

delimiting forces of what bell hooks names “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (Yancy and hooks). I also ask them to ponder what new possibilities hooks’s own rearticulations of queerness, “as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live” (01:27:46–01:28:00), might open up for our discussions of Wolfe, O’Hara, and Cooper’s scripts.

Much like the term *queer*, students are often equally eager to clarify the definition of *aesthetics*. While they typically associate the concept with ideas about beauty, its allures, and its appreciation, they are quick to recognize the ways such a definition will likely prove too insufficient or irrelevant for their interpretive purposes. I use the trail-blazing work of scholar Lisa M. Anderson on Black feminist theatre to supplement our conversations about how we might define and understand the term. In her book *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, Anderson details some of the ways she sees a Black feminist theatre aesthetic reflected in the work of playwrights including Pearl Cleage, Breena Clarke, Glenda Dickerson, Suzan-Lori Parks, Kia Corthron, Shirlene Holmes, and Sharon Bridgforth. Anderson ventures “to sketch out something we might call a black feminist aesthetic” in the book’s final chapter (115), but before doing so, she first explains what she intends the word *aesthetic* to signify: “By ‘aesthetic’ I mean not the beauty of the text, but rather the elements of the text or performance that invoke a particular history, politics, or philosophy of a ‘community’ (broadly construed)” (115). For Anderson, “the elements of the text or performance that comprise the aesthetic may range from structure, to plot, to characters” (115). Anderson’s explication of the Black feminist theatre aesthetic provides a constructive way for the class to begin thinking about the idea of a *Black queer theatrical aesthetic* as a mode of creating, one deeply attuned to the transformative possibilities of Black queerness in and to the theatre.

Deciding in community how we will engage with and mobilize the concept affords crucial opportunities for students to hone their critical and theoretical vocabularies. It also serves to bolster their confidence in turning attention to and closely analysing the plays, which I assign in chronological order to ensure that the intertextual connections between them accumulate and resonate across the term. *Bootycandy* and *Ain’t No Mo’* no doubt inspire thoughtful deliberations of how Black queer theatrical aesthetics at once invigorate their dramaturgy and enhance their meanings.

The Gospel According to *Bootycandy*

Robert O’Hara is well regarded as a playwright who, much like Wolfe, enjoys pushing formal, dramaturgical, and theatrical boundaries. Not surprisingly, there are many resonances between the two playwrights’ bodies of work.

O'Hara often cites Wolfe as one of his most significant mentors and interlocutors. The pair's collaborative relationship began when O'Hara was an undergraduate student at Tufts University, where he staged a production of *The Colored Museum* that would solidify his desire to become a professional director. The two artists would develop even closer ties during O'Hara's time as an MFA student in directing at Columbia University.³ Frustrated by what he cited as the faculty's misguided attempts to box plays into tidy categories and to admonish him for being "a little bit too focused on African-American and gay issues," O'Hara wrote his first play, *Insurrection: Holding History*, which he later staged for his thesis project at Columbia (O'Bryan). "Most of my colleagues felt their theses [were] the culmination of their graduate school work[.] [...] I felt my thesis would be the beginning of my professional career. So, I decided to do a new play and introduce myself," he explained in an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Whiting). Wolfe took notice of this introduction and in the winter of 1996 produced *Insurrection: Holding History* at the Public Theater, where he served as artistic director from 1993 to 2004. In his review of the show for the *New York Times*, critic Peter Marks noted that "stylized dramatic works about black America such as Suzan-Lori Parks's [The] 'America Play' and George C. Wolfe's 'Colored Museum'" had clearly influenced O'Hara ("Of Slavery and Sex" C27). To be sure, with *Insurrection: Holding History*, O'Hara offered a potent rejoinder to Wolfe's charge in *The Colored Museum* to reimagine what constitutes Black drama and theatre. O'Hara, Faedra Chatard Carpenter observes, not only "queers history by emphasizing history's own performativity" in the play but also "opens a space for alternative concepts of sexual orientation, race, and gender identity to exist within our historicized imaginations and imagined histories" (325). The play powerfully documents the rich possibilities in thinking Black history and expressive culture more queerly and capaciously.

Outlining some of the personal and professional connections between Wolfe and O'Hara supplies necessary context for students as they begin to examine the relationship between *The Colored Museum* and *Bootycandy*. Importantly, it also invites them to ponder the kinds of questions that considering the latter play as a companion piece to Wolfe's text raises. These include: What shape might *The Colored Museum* take if it were updated or rewritten for twenty-first-century audiences? What aspects of contemporary African American life and culture are begging to be satirized? What new limitations on Black expressive culture perhaps require undoing? And what fresh possibilities might be gleaned by centring Blackness and queerness dramaturgically?

Composed of eleven vignettes tied loosely together by a central character named Sutter – a Black gay playwright who doubles for O'Hara – *Bootycandy* structurally mirrors *The Colored Museum*. In shuttling between the 1970s

childhood abode of its young, precocious protagonist in the opening scene to the 1980s nursing home of his grandmother in the play's final sequence, it also departs from the earlier play significantly. While *The Colored Museum's* introduction of one of the most iconic Black queer characters in contemporary theatre history – the self-described extra-terrestrial snap queen, Miss Roj – mostly unfolds in a single vignette, “The Gospel According to Miss Roj,” O’Hara centres Black queer experience throughout *Bootycandy* to leverage the play’s trenchant critiques. The different vignettes move playfully through Sutter’s youth, adolescence, and adult years, flouting linearity, to explicitly satirize matters of race, sex, and desire. The play, Marks notes in his *Washington Post* review of the 2011 Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company production, offers “a toxically satiric portrait of American life, as it is experienced by someone who is black and gay” (“Robert O’Hara’s ‘Booty Candy’”). *Bootycandy* draws part of its charge from the investments it displays in disabusing audiences of any misguided ideas about the incongruities of these identity categories – misguided ideas that Wolfe also challenges through Miss Roj’s acerbic commentary on the shortcomings of life in the post–Civil Rights era.

Focusing in on several of the play’s vignettes with students provides space to interrogate the specific strategies O’Hara develops and deploys in the script to expand possibilities for Black queerness. Two vignettes, “Drinks and Desire” and “The Last Gay Play,” offer great entry points for examining the ways that O’Hara frequently traffics in the taboo to complicate attachments to certain normative ideas about race, sex, and sexuality. “Drinks and Desire” stages Sutter’s attempts to arrange a casual sexual encounter with a white character named Roy. The scene, as its title suggests, unfolds over drinks at various bars throughout an undefined city and witnesses Sutter and Roy discussing their shared desire to have sex. Their conversation quickly takes an explicit turn, with Roy at one point blurting out:

I want you to ride my big dick
and let me fuck deep inside you
I wanna fuck your face
I wanna fuck your ass (151)

Roy clarifies that he will do anything that Sutter asks of him sexually, save for kissing him. The act of kissing is presumably too intimate for the ostensibly “straight” Roy. The conversation ends with both men declaring, “let’s go” and the lights going out. In the darkness, audiences are left to assume that Sutter and Roy manifest their sexual fantasies. When the lights come back up on the duo, they are again discussing sex. This time, the topic of conversation shifts to Sutter’s earliest sexual experience. He reveals that his first partner was Roy’s father. To reassure Roy that it was not a coerced encounter, he explains:

I wanted it
I asked for it
I begged for him to (156)

Provocatively, as the conversation continues, it is revealed that Roy is Sutter's brother-in-law. And though Sutter and Roy have been having a sexual affair, Roy maintains his "straightness," telling Sutter:

You're not
the person
I wanna spend the rest of my life with
I can't make that type of
com
com
commitment (164–65)

O'Hara's turn toward the explicit and taboo in the vignette troubles some students. However, just as many of them are usually eager to contemplate to what end he deploys this dramaturgical strategy. I ask them to think about what the exchanges perhaps reveal about the potency of desire's transgressing logics: that is, the ways that desire often frustrates the stability of ideologies and discourses delimiting notions of race, gender, and sexuality, as well as other vectors of identity. That the scene treats its taboo topics mundanely is notable. We discuss how this strategy perhaps works to throw into crisis any attempts to regard Sutter and Roy's explicit sex talk as marginal and, thus, dismissible.

"The Last Gay Play," a vignette that again finds Sutter sipping cocktails at a bar talking sex, this time with a Black friend named Larry, offers an additional opportunity to interrogate the effects of this strategy. Of note are the ways O'Hara exposes the radical potential of failure in the scene to advance the play's broader commentary about the ungovernability of race, sex, and desire. When Clint, a white character who is intrigued by Sutter and Larry's sexual identities, joins them at their table, Sutter decides to have a little fun with the "straight drunk looking for attention" (216). A rather raunchy game of truth or dare ensues, and it ultimately leads to Clint asking Sutter and Larry if they will join him in his hotel room. Like Roy, Clint makes it clear that he is not gay. However, he is interested in being "humiliated": sex with two Black men promises to satisfy this desire (224). The scene eventually finds Sutter and Larry at Clint's hotel room, which is in complete disarray. Things take a decidedly dark turn when Sutter, having returned to the bar sometime later, admits that he and Larry fulfilled Clint's masochistic wishes. The vignette breaks down soon thereafter. The performers drop character and begin to question the efficacy and ethics of the director, the playwright, and the encounter the vignette stages between Sutter, Larry, and Clint. It is unclear if this scripted

breakdown recalls an actual conversation that might have taken place at some point in the play's development or rehearsal process. Nevertheless, it provides an opportunity to think about how *failures* in content and form get reimagined as artful interventions in O'Hara's dramaturgy.

Jack Halberstam's work in *The Queer Art of Failure* helps enhance our discussions of this proposition. Halberstam observes that failure quite often offers its own rewards, especially for the queer, who fail exceptionally well (3). Failure, Halberstam continues, "allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods" (3). Drawing on Halberstam's articulation of the queer potential in failure, we consider how the breakdown of "The Last Gay Play" perhaps challenges our attachments to certain sexual norms and mores. We also interrogate the ways the vignette's failure perhaps calls into question what constitutes a sound dramaturgical praxis and, in so doing, responds directly to the call of Wolfe's "The Last Mama on the Couch Play" to imagine Black expressive culture beyond normative dramaturgical constraints. Wolfe "ridicules the limits that domestic realism has placed on African-American drama" in the vignette by dramatizing "the stultifying effects of convention and adherence to tradition in African-American theatre," Elam writes (300). As the failures of "The Last Gay Play" surface, O'Hara refuses to be disciplined by any dramaturgical conventions or traditions. Indeed, across its vignettes, *Bootycandy* reflects a deep commitment to dramaturgical aberrance and unruliness.

Ultimately, we pivot to exploring how O'Hara's experimentations with Black queer theatrical aesthetics in *Bootycandy* enables him to centre queer of colour critiques in the play's vignettes. The occasional moves away from the dramas of Sutter's life are especially illustrative of the play's aims to call out and counter certain oppressive systems and structures. The second vignette, "Dreamin in Church," not only offers some of O'Hara's most scathing commentary on the harms that institutions often perpetuate – in this instance, the Black Church – but further prompts considerations of what an embrace of transgression and subversion might make possible both in the theatre and in our everyday lives. Black respectability politics and the logics of sexual normativity come under particular scrutiny in the vignette. O'Hara satirizes the endurance of these politics and logics within theological spaces, reimagining the "Black church" as a queer space in which its community of witness-participants can enjoy an especially Black queer time.

"Dreamin in Church" focuses on Reverend Benson, "a minister with a passion for the Scriptures, sequins, stilettos, and RuPaul's 'sashays'" (Wooden, Review 282). Wearing an elaborate floor-length clergy robe, Benson takes to the pulpit of his church to rail against what he calls the "I HEARD FOLK"

(O'Hara 124), a faction in the church who trade in gossip and rumour to inveigh against the presence of the “sexually perverted” (126). The I HEARD FOLK, Benson preaches, implore him to either “put ratt” the “sexually perverted” or get rid of them altogether “‘cos gawd don't allow no sin folk / in the kingdom / so we shouldn't allow that kind / in our church” (126). The primary purpose of Benson's sermon is to address one of the rumours that the I HEARD FOLK have been circulating about his own gender expression and queer sexuality. Calling the sermon a “Teachable Moment,” Benson pulls up the hem of his robe, flaunts the beautiful high heel shoes that he is wearing, adorns his head with a glamorous wig, grabs his purse, and paints his face with lipstick and rouge (134). In other words, he affirms the gossip, but not before offering the I HEARD FOLK several lessons in Black queerness. We contemplate how O'Hara uses these lessons to speak to the ways desire often flouts conceptions of the normative embedded in and proliferated by theological discourses. In the end, Reverend Benson's desire to wear a wig, a beautiful gown, and matching pumps while sashaying and reciting the lyrics to RuPaul's hit song refuses to be contained or constrained by the I HEARD FOLK's invectives and the theological and ideological ideas undergirding them. The scene bids students to consider the strategic ways, through both form and content, O'Hara hails audiences into dreaming an alternative vision of being Black and queer and full participants in the social and cultural life of the Black community.

While “Dreamin in Church” comes early in *Bootycandy*, it provides a great landing place to conclude discussions of the play. I use its “teachable moments” to have students ponder what O'Hara's engagements with Black queer theatrical aesthetics perhaps reveal about the important lessons African American theatre and drama continue to demonstrate about the complexities of African American life in the post-Civil Rights era.

After “The Party,” *Ain't No Mo'*

Much like O'Hara, Jordan E. Cooper benefited from the support of key Black queer mentors – most notably, Oscar-nominated director, producer, and screenwriter Lee Daniels – and the Public Theater as he was launching his professional career. The story goes that after seeing an early iteration of Cooper's *Ain't No Mo'*, Daniels hired the budding theatre maker to serve as a writer on his Fox series *Star* (2016–19) and committed to developing and producing a full production of the play. Cooper began writing his satirical romp in the summer of 2016, in the wake of the police killings of Philando Castille and Alton Sterling. Turning to *The Colored Museum* for inspiration, which Cooper observes had “always been kind of in my own Zeitgeist,” the playwright committed to creating a work that would grant both him and his audiences

space to reckon with some of the everyday challenges continuing to plague Black people in the United States in the twenty-first century (Wilbekin). The waning excitement about and promise of the election of Barack Obama looms large in the script. So much of the play pivots on questions of what to do with the knowledge that the first Black presidency did not provide “a conclusion to the narrative of racial progress [or], indeed, to the conundrum of race” (Wooden, “Complex” 172).

Examining Cooper’s script with students brings many of the connections they trace between Wolfe and O’Hara’s experimentations with Black queer theatrical aesthetics into sharper relief. Doing so also allows them to grapple with some of the ways Cooper strategically repeats and revises these experiments in his own dramaturgy. We begin by analysing how *Ain’t No Mo’* structurally diverges from *The Colored Museum* and *Bootycandy*, often activating interesting conversations. While the two earlier works are each divided into eleven vignettes, Cooper’s script is notably composed of a prologue delivered in voice-over and eight scenes. This reduction in the number of scenes might, at first blush, seem insignificant. However, when prompted to give it some serious thought, students often make compelling observations about how this structural choice connects to the play’s broader temporal themes. There is an emphasis on time and urgency reflected throughout Cooper’s script. In a trio of vignettes entitled “Exit Strategy 1,” “Exit Strategy 2,” and “Exit Strategy 3,” for example, a flight agent named Peaches repeatedly reminds us that the window for Black Americans to get the last airplane back to Africa is quickly closing: “Ok well, ya’ll need to hurry the hell up, cause I just got this job and I can’t be holding flights for y’all, especially not this one. We got to go” (11). Described as a beautiful and larger-than-life drag queen, Peaches (a role that Cooper performed in the 2019 Public Theater production) shares similarities with both the Miss Pat and Miss Roj characters from *The Colored Museum*. All three characters offer up searing meditations on the Black past and present and, in doing so, provoke fresh imaginings of a more liberatory Black future.

The shrewd and playful ways Cooper calls attention to the intersections of race and time in the play provide students further opportunities to contemplate the function of Black queer theatrical aesthetics in the show. The play’s first scene, “The Book of Revelation (November 4th, 2008),” perhaps announces its investments in decoupling Blackness from notions of time and temporality embedded in and proliferated by narratives of progress most compellingly. The scene stages the funeral for a figure named Brother “Right-to-complain.” “We are gathered here today to put asunder one whom many of you know, one whom many of us have known our entire lives,” Pastor Freeman, the funeral’s officiant, asserts (4). A beloved and steadfast member of the African American community, Brother ‘Rightto-complain,’ we are

told, enjoyed a long, though somewhat unusual life. “He had many mothers and fathers, and too many children with too many mothers to even begin to count,” Pastor Freeman remarks (5). Despite the revered position he held among Black people and his surviving through some of the most difficult times in recent history, Brother ‘RighttoComplain’ ultimately meets a tragic end. He is murdered on the evening of 4 November 2008. It is “the election of [the] First Negro President of these United States” that, in fact, causes the homicidal act (5). It is also this historical event that leaves the many Black people left to grieve Brother ‘RighttoComplain’ bereft of any hope that things will indeed get better. Students are usually quick to pick up on the vignette’s critiques of the post-racial ideas and rhetoric that proliferated in the aftermath of Obama’s electoral victory. They point to Pastor Freeman’s declaration in the scene, that “because the President is a nigga there ain’t no mo discrimination, aint no mo’ holleration, aint gone be NO more haterration in this dancierie, do you hear me what I say? I say it ain’t no mo,” as evidence of this contention (7).⁴ Often less obvious to them, however, are the ways the scene speaks to the tremendous mourning that those for whom “progress” offers little to no relief must negotiate.

Cooper’s dramaturgy is full of incisive commentary that invites reflection on the conditions of Black life in the twenty-first century. Students are especially keen to explore how, much like Wolfe and O’Hara before him, he integrates everyday Black speech and profanity in the play to enhance its critiques. While African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and swearing are routinely (and problematically) held up by some as evidence of a limited vocabulary, we consider how, through his repetitive and accumulative engagements with both, Cooper demonstrates their expressive potentiality and potency. Curse words, in particular, become a way for characters to convey feelings or emotions that cannot be captured by other language. “Yes I said fuck, don’t act like you ain’t never felt a fuck in your spirit, come on now somebody,” Cooper has Pastor Freeman remark early in the play to make clear that the script’s engagements with profanity are deliberate (7). I encourage students to think about how the uses of AAVE and profanity in the play – and in *The Colored Museum* and *Bootycandy* too – perhaps function as tools for community-building while also affirming Cooper’s commitment, one shared with Wolfe and O’Hara, to breaching societal rules and norms in both language and action.

Not surprisingly, because *Ain’t No Mo’* is the most recent of the three plays and refers to figures and events that they are more familiar with, students usually find the critiques it advances more convincing. Of course, what I have come to appreciate about teaching the script, which is relatively new and understudied, are the ways it helps me underscore for them the boldness with

which African American dramatists across generations have used the theatre both to experiment with new aesthetic practices, ideas, and forms and to register dissent, effect change, and inspire the making of new worlds.

As I detail in this article, teaching *Bootycandy* and *Ain't No Mo'* in conversation with *The Colored Museum* – and analysing the ways Black queer theatrical aesthetics pervade all three – has proven an especially rewarding pedagogical strategy. In addition to enriching students' engagements with the legacy of Wolfe as an influential experimental theatre maker, this approach has opened up important conversations about some of the distinguishing characteristics of African American theatre and drama in the post-Civil Rights era and the important ways that Black queer artists have helped transform the ever-evolving genre. As Wolfe, O'Hara, and Cooper's plays demonstrate, African American dramatic literature remains a crucial site of knowledge production, cultural critique, and trenchant commentary. Correspondingly, I maintain that it is an invaluable resource for encouraging and expanding student understanding and learning.

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NOTES

1. Even some of the play's admirers found parts of it difficult to digest. Wolfe spoke to this in a 1986 interview with *New York Times* reporter Jeremy Gerard, observing, "At each performance, some people come out laughing, others crying. The other night, someone said to me, 'This is too painful to go through.' But I believe that wounds heal better in open air." While Wolfe was unwavering in his convictions about the power and capacity of his dramaturgy to heal, audiences often expressed greater ambivalence about it. See Gerard.
2. During New York City's 1990 Gay Pride Parade, individuals marching with ACT UP's contingent distributed pamphlets entitled "The Queer Nation Manifesto," which, in part, read: "How can I convince you, brother, sister that your life is in danger: That everyday you wake up alive, relatively happy, and a functioning human being, you are committing a rebellious act. You as an alive and functioning queer

are a revolutionary.” According to the manifesto, which deploys *queer* primarily as a noun, being queer means “everyday fighting oppression; homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites and our own self-hatred [...]. [B]eing queer means leading a different sort of life.” The text was included in an anonymously published leaflet distributed at the New York City Pride events in 1990. The full text is accessible via the ACT UP New York website: <http://www.actupny.org/documents/QueersReadThis.pdf>. See Johnson and Henderson’s introductory essay to *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* for a more complete version of this history.

3. See Ali for more details on Wolfe and O’Hara’s relationship.
4. The declaration draws its humour, in part, from its incorporation of lyrics from singer Mary J. Blige’s 2001 song “Family Affair.”

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