

BOOK REVIEW

Living with Lynching. African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930

Koritha Mitchell

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Embodied Practices of Black Belonging and Identity Formation in Lynching Drama of the Progressive Era: Koritha Mitchell's *Living with Lynching*

The volume authored by Koritha Mitchell is a remarkable contribution to the field of African American drama, as it explores the manifold uses of lynching plays during the Progressive era as crucial tools to ensure community conversation and debate about the difficulties and complexities involved in having to coexist with the terrible reality of lynching. Mitchell's groundbreaking study reassesses the significance of black theater as an archive and repertoire of embodied practices of black belonging and community-building in the face of constant exposure not only to lynching itself, but to the insidious exhibition of lynching photographs that perpetuated the myth of the black brute and rapist. The publication proposes an innovative critical reading that counteracts this racist practice by investigating the impact of lynching on both the black family and the black home, focusing on lynching dramas written by prominent writers and intellectuals from 1890 to 1930, such as Angelina Weld Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Mary Burrill, Georgia Douglass Johnson, Myrtle Smith Livingston, G. D. Lipscomb, and Joseph Mitchell. By analyzing the development of the genre itself, which was initiated by black women, Mitchell highlights how lynching drama helped to "read aright" the horrible

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practice of lynching as a profoundly unjust and unjustified manifestation of racial hatred resulting from the need to remind African Americans of their inferior status in a markedly segregated country. In so doing, her work succeeds in confirming black performance as a recurrent means conveniently used by African Americans to assert black citizenship and black identity.

Mitchell's excellent study is neatly divided into two sections that complement each other. Part I, "Making Lynching Drama and its Contributions Legible", sets the stage by introducing readers to the scenes and scenarios of actual lynchings, as well as the development of black-authored plays that effectively challenged the weighty legacy of minstrelsy and comedy. Part II, "Developing a Genre, Asserting Black Citizenship", offers a nuanced analysis of the recurrent figures in the lynching plays of the period: the black soldier, the black lawyer, the black mother/wife, and the pimp and the coward. Mitchell repeatedly shows her deep knowledge of the discourses and practices of the time through a highly perceptive account of its background that is both ideologically and historically grounded.

The first chapter is devoted to explaining the scenes and scenarios that were enacted during what Mitchell aptly claims to be the "theatrical production" of an actual lynching. She effectively sets the records straight by means of a reformulation of the mob enactment and of the photographic display that followed. One of the most compelling and disputed issues at stake in the enactment of lynching is intimately related to the justification of lynching itself as a corrective practice to ward off the "black brute", "the criminal", and allegedly ensure social and racial harmony. From this first chapter onwards Mitchell is able to deconstruct the notion of lynching as a "scenario of exorcism" by unmasking the white supremacist logic that supported the spectacle of brutalized black bodies. Quite consistently, Mitchell underlines the way in which the racist practice of lynching became ritualized murder effectively used to sustain white superiority while declaring the immorality and bestiality of blacks in general, and black men in particular. Thus, Mitchell argues that lynching became theatrical in the sense that it provided the opportunity to exorcize the "evil" that endangered (white) "civilization", according to the dominant view of the period.

On the other hand, lynching drama provided the ideal access to what Diana Taylor defined as “the archive and the repertoire of turn-of-the-century US culture” (cited in Mitchell 2011: 23), which are key concepts that prove quite productive in Mitchell’s analysis. In her insightful use of these two concepts Mitchell overturns Western scholarship’s investment in the archive in detriment of the repertoire, and demonstrates their complementarity. When examining the community practices that lynching drama fostered throughout the Progressive era, both archive and repertoire become essential in the text. What is also innovative in Mitchell’s apt reading of lynching is her shifting focus from the victimized black body to the equally victimized black family life and black home. She persuasively contends that lynching playwrights invested deeply in what may be referred to as a cult of domesticity², because they “understood the significance of showcasing – for themselves, not whites – black family life at a time when mainstream discourses and practices constantly asserted that African Americans had no interest, or moral capacity for, stable domesticity” (Mitchell 2011: 27). Through the scripts of these plays, these writers made useful embodied practices of black belonging available to both family and community, while bolstering their self-conceptions. Moreover, these scripts also incorporate necessary confirmation of their rightful belonging to the nation, thus problematizing configurations of both citizenship and nationhood.

The author’s committed stance becomes more evident in her theorization of lynching plays as artifacts/mediums to contest the mainstream “politics of representation”, exemplified by a rhetoric based on black barbarity and white righteousness. Indeed, Mitchell makes much of Stuart Hall’s notion, especially as she ties it to the need for racial self-affirmation and cultural expression, which were deemed priorities by black artists and intellectuals at that time. To allow for community mourning and survival, these playwrights redefined both what was theatrical and the theatrical form itself by valuing non-commercial and amateur work. In that line, these dramatists created

² Hazel Carby explains the significance of the cult of domesticity propitiated by the ideology known as the “cult of true womanhood” that emerged in the nineteenth century and its influence on black women writers in her classical work *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987).

alternative public spaces that helped identity formation through “communal literacy”³, thus encouraging the production of both self- and communal-affirming knowledge.

In the second chapter, the author engages in a thorough redefinition of “black theater” that emphasizes how the legacy of minstrelsy and comedy was effectively challenged by black-authored plays, paying special attention to the significant ways in which black writers responded to W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1926 call for the emergence of a black theater, “about us, by us, for us and near us” (Mitchell 2011: 45)⁴. She brings to the forefront the interesting debate about black representation that was taking place in the twenties, and which can be traced back to the previous decade. Revisiting the history of black drama, she is tactful enough to remind readers of the legacy of black performers in both minstrelsy and musical comedy, especially successful all-black Broadway musicals. Mitchell thus provides an updated revision of the emergence of black-authored drama, addressing crucial topics such as representation, aesthetic choices, and black audience. She also manages to navigate the objections that were raised to black renditions of white-authored classics (such as Shakespeare) and Broadway hits. In the midst of Harlem success, there were different proposals about what kind of theater was actually intended, going from Locke’s timely meditation of the “academic model as the most viable” (Mitchell 2011: 53) to more community-based approaches elaborated by Du Bois.

By means of an in-depth analysis of the thematic and formal devices in *Rachel*, Mitchell acknowledges the pioneering efforts on the part of Angelina Weld Grimké to respond to this new writer-centered conception of black theater. This play paved the way for later lynching drama in many ways: in its politics of representing African American identity as shaped by mob violence and trauma, in its indictment of hypocritical Christianity, and in its tracing the everlasting damaging effects on black households. On the other hand, the reaction to the play’s formal staging – a full-length production with emphasis on plot and directed toward an integrated audience – also facilitated later writers’ aesthetic choices. When fashioning a theory of black identity formation and citizenship,

³ In *Forgotten Readers* the literary historian Elizabeth McHenry describes how African Americans exercised communal literacy via memorization thanks to reading aloud and dramatic readings (cited in Mitchell 2011: 40).

⁴ In his famous essay “Criteria for Negro Art” published in *The Crisis* in 1926, Du Bois outlined the importance of art as propaganda for African Americans in order to achieve recognition for their contributions to American culture.

certain main patterns emerged and pervaded later plays: “virtuous womanhood, honorable manhood, and innocent childhood” in Mitchell’s words (Mitchell 2011: 61). Questioning mainstream discourses about blacks’ moral corruption, these plays would blatantly depict white immorality, and blacks’ vulnerability to institutionalized physical and representational violence. She grounds this depiction on the enduring influence of the cult of true womanhood in the case of women, and on the need for inclusion in hegemonic models of manhood felt by black men back then. At this point she makes an interesting distinction between “manliness” and “masculinity”, which would have needed further contextualization within the field of masculinity studies, and more specifically black masculinity studies⁵. Finally, she also discusses the concept of degeneration, spotlighting the resulting generational damage and the disruption of the structure of both family and community that lynching caused. In this way, she is able to call into question well-known sociological studies of the black family, such as the controversial 1965 report by Daniel Moynihan or the work of Franklin Frazier or Herbert Gutman, which overlooked and underestimated the role that mob violence and lynching played after Emancipation⁶, according to Mitchell.

In the chapters to follow Mitchell pays homage to the playwrights that started the genre from scratch, as it were, especially the women writers that initiated it. Following the lead of Ida B. Wells, Mitchell meditates on the enormous contributions that these women made to the development of black drama, and documents the unprecedented effort to revise mainstream discourses and practices that they undertake in their plays. Her impressive reading of the plays under study asserts the richness of lynching drama, as well as its heterogeneity and plurality.

Chapter 3 evolves around the figure of the black soldier, as portrayed in Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918) and Mary Burrill’s *Aftermath* (1919). This chapter is very illustrative of the book’s scope, since it chronicles the empowering practices these plays fostered as they were published in progressive periodicals such as *Crisis* and *The Liberator*. Indeed, as Mitchell proves, this representative figure enabled

⁵ Mitchell cites one or two critics, especially Bederman, but her analysis would have benefited from other critical perspectives, such as *We Real Cool* by bell hooks, *Black Sexual Politics* by Patricia Hill Collins, or *Progressive Black Masculinities* by Athena Mutua, to name but a few.

⁶ Frazier’s report was published in 1939 and Gutman’s in 1976. With different intensity, the three studies coincided in the explanatory causes of the deterioration of the black family, namely its lack of adherence to patriarchal patterns due to black women’s role as matriarchs in the absence of black men.

positive articulation of black self-affirmation. Undermining the deep anxiety that affected blacks regarding their attitude to their country's contradictions and patriotic rhetoric, both plays epitomize the so-called "perpetual dilemma" (Mitchell 2011: 85)⁷, in which black men found themselves torn between their duty to their country and the doubts about the legitimacy of that duty. In her thought-provoking discussion of both plays, Mitchell unearths those searing contradictions by equating military and mob tactics, and underscoring the challenges that black men faced in the midst of dehumanizing practices and unresolved tensions, I would contend, both within the military and within the terrain of the black home. Featuring the intense debate in the private sphere of the black family, these two writers stage characters who intelligently engage in negotiations that complicate blind acceptance of the national rhetoric, and call for their rightful claim on full black citizenship ignited by an increasing notion of black militancy in the New Negro era. These plays also serve the purpose of showcasing "additional evidence of the intellectual diversity found in African American communities" (Mitchell 2011: 98), as they account for divergent opinions on these highly complex issues. Moreover, these scripts also articulate their authors' awareness of other influential discourses of the time, such as the religious or the democratic one, in their contributions to the contemporary debate on dignified black manhood.

Chapter 4 centers on the black lawyer as a figure that was instrumental in preserving community testimony. The author consistently argues for the centrality of the black attorney in Georgia Douglass Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) and Myrtle Smith Livingston's *For Unborn Children* (1926) "as a figure who embodies the race's faith in truth and justice" (Mitchell 2011: 115) – against all odds, I would add. She discusses the transition from the black soldier to the black lawyer, contextualizing the ignominious real-life indignities that led to the defeat of the Dyer Anti-lynching Bill and the race riots that erupted in many cities in the so-called Red Summer of 1919. All these events sparked these playwrights' interest in depicting the unjust ways in which black testimony was rejected and silenced, and consequently black citizenship was denied. Mitchell's close reading of these two plays maps out that rejection of black testimony, together with a reevaluation of the importance of community acknowledgement and bonding, especially of the nurturing role of the black church.

⁷ Springing from Du Bois's editorial of the same title that appeared in the April issue of *Crisis*.

Using Bakhtin's notion of "contested discourse", she captures the characters' deep belief in the justice system and reveals the devastating effects of that belief in the face of white barbarism. By reversing the racist logic, she undoubtedly affirms moral black manliness and brute white masculinity. Livingston's play adds further layers of meaning when dealing with interracial coupling and black men's dilemma between manliness and masculinity. In the context of the play, interracial coupling does not respond to honorable codes of black manhood; on the contrary, it disrupts black citizenship by failing to comply with the need to build respectable and strong black families. She delves into the complex notion of consensual relationships with whites, and the debate that ensued between personal freedom and community responsibility. Mitchell's most suggestive passages come at the end of the chapter, when she offers a lucid reinterpretation of the New Negro era, allegedly optimistic and confident, but which also evidences the ambivalent – indeed precarious – position that black lawyers, and by extension all black men, had to come to terms with in their daily lives. She also exposes the "justified anxiety" (Mitchell 2011: 143), in Mitchell's words, that the denial of black citizenship engendered in the black community.

In Chapter 5 Mitchell deciphers the crucial role black women played in lynching drama, especially prominent in three later plays authored by Georgia Douglass Johnson, *Blue Blood* (1926), *Safe* (1929), and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930). Asserting the importance of black women in order to substantiate black claims to private space and respectable marriages and families, she enunciates their investment in the "politics of respectability" (Mitchell 2011: 149), inspired by the lingering influence of the cult of true womanhood and domesticity. The author convincingly argues that the figure of the black mother/wife facilitates the difficult negotiation with trauma and terror, as she embodies "what it means to live with lynching" (Mitchell 2011: 151). Despite the patent vulnerability of the black family to white "homefront violence"⁸ and its sadistic practices, Mitchell builds a coherent defense of the devices employed in these lynching plays to highlight how black women actively (and successfully) sustained both romantic and parental bonds. In some cases, this involved quite difficult decisions such as silence

⁸ Anne Rices uses this concept to refer to the strategies of racial terror deployed in the race riots that took place in 1917 and 1919 (cited in Mitchell 2011: 149), but Mitchell deems it a very useful term to apply to the enactment of lynching in general, as it unashamedly took violence inside the black household to tear it apart, both literally and metaphorically.

about rape, a sexual encounter with a white man, or even infanticide. Bearing witness to the dehumanizing and deeply disturbing psychological price that these women had to pay to signify upon normative definitions of black women's immorality, Mitchell unmistakably discloses the complex "plight" of black women, also caught up in the inevitable dilemma between securing domestic fulfillment and claiming their rights to agency and consent. The most extreme example of this perpetual dilemma is embodied by the protagonist of *Safe*, who after having witnessed a lynching mob pursuing a black man, decides to kill her newborn baby to safeguard him. Illuminating productive discussions of infanticide, not as blacks' inner savagery (according to the racist rationale), but as a means to exercise responsible parenthood and parental rights, Mitchell once more contradicts mainstream discourses by placing the blame where it belongs: on the white society that "makes the world dangerous for black children" (Mitchell 2011: 165). Mitchell thus disregards the justification of black women's exploitation in the national rhetoric of the time by making readers aware of their fundamental role in the stability of both family and community.

The last chapter rounds off Mitchell's stimulating study by centering on lynching plays authored by black male playwrights, namely G. D. Limpscomb's *Frances* (1925) and Joseph Mitchell's *Son-Boy* (1928), both of them featuring the ambivalent figures of the pimp and the coward. The chapter takes as its premise Mitchell's stance that allegedly questions the "logic of hierarchical approaches" (Mitchell 2011: 175), by which she does not want to describe these black men's contributions as secondary or less important. While sharing Mitchell's view about the vernacular, especially useful in the call/response pattern, and valuing – as she does – the greater variety that these plays add to the genre, I would nevertheless reassess at this point the previous women playwrights' groundbreaking work that allowed for the establishment and further evolution of the genre. Having said this, though, Mitchell's incisive analysis of these plays confers meaning to the ongoing debate about the traumatic effects of lynching on black men, especially those who eventually refuse to be heads of household because of the risk of losing their lives and jeopardizing their black homes. These plays textualize the intensity of the emasculation of black men whose behavior does not correspond to the concept of dignified black manhood mentioned above, but which is also incorporated into community conversation in order to enable nuanced interpretations of

the link between economic power, black success, and black manhood. Resisting the strategy of masculine normalization, the fact that the pimp's and the coward's perspectives are not dismissed further indicates the multifaceted practice of community debate that was essential to the Progressive era.

Probing into documenting black performance in her conclusion, Mitchell's book drives her final point home by stressing once more – and rather reiteratively I would add – the importance of performance for the black community. Her penetrating comments actually support the crucial role of lynching drama in the community's embodied practices of belonging and identity formation, while favoring a comprehensive and rigorous reinterpretation of the archive and repertoire of the New Negro era. Therefore, the volume discussed here undoubtedly contributes to the study of African American drama, as it prompts new and fresh insights into an impressive range of theatrical texts and their multiple strategies. It is thus a welcome addition to the reassessment of the black drama produced in the Progressive era, while it also enriches and deepens our understanding of American drama in general.

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