

The Opposite of Absence Is “To Occupy”

[SHAVONNE COLEMAN](#)

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

[MERIAH SAGE](#)

UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN MICHIGAN

ABSTRACT

This article examines the pervasive absence of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) narratives in the history of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) and advocates for restorative documentation and inclusion. Through the Hidden and Erased BIPOC Histories project, the authors explore the contributions of figures like Ann K. Flagg and Rosa Lee Scott, as well as institutions such as Karamu House, as critical to understanding TYA's evolution. The article critiques the dominance of Eurocentric frameworks in theatre scholarship and calls for the integration of Black and Brown stories into classrooms, conferences, and academic texts. By uncovering hidden histories and creating new systems of recognition, the authors propose a shift from absence to "occupying" the field with equity and radical inclusion. This work seeks to ensure that BIPOC contributions are celebrated as integral to American theatre's past, present, and future.

Absence. Absence has the power to predetermine outcomes, to change history, and to alter value systems. Whether factual or fictitious the perceived reality of absence is not only an annoyance but goes beyond that to an effective weapon to be yielded to gatekeep, build barriers, or fashion bridgeless motes. Anti-Indigeneity and Anti-Blackness is what this country was built on, a foundation of a nation that can't truly be dismantled until we are a country that acknowledges how it impacts the present and the future, pulling the weeds out by the root not just lopping off what can be seen on the surface. American Theatre can only be changed through a learning and knowing of historical realities which can only be done by understanding what was happening in not only dominant theatre culture but those communities and populations segregated, red-lined, and intentionally marginalized to the hoods of the United States. Specifically here, we explore TYA (Theatre for Young Audiences) and its hidden and erased histories held by Black, Indigenous, and all People of Color, often referred to as the Global Majority, racially minoritized, or racially and ethnically marginalized. Here we will use BIPOC, not as a hierarchy of melanin but as a more broadly understood term that acknowledges that this country was created or better yet, colonized through acts of genocide, violence, exploitation, and other intentionally harmful acts for the purpose of furthering colonialism. So what, for us, is the responsibility of our work, organization, and field to not only uncover the histories that go unheard or underrepresented in our classrooms, conferences, and board rooms, but also to create new systems, now, that will ensure we don't repeat the cycle of segregating the work of our artists, educators, and practitioners? The work involves digging, retrieving, dusting off or sometimes assembling the puzzle pieces of artifacts, narratives, and experiences said not to exist to then catalog and celebrate just as widely and loudly as those who've navigated similar paths in the bright lights of dominant culture.

What is this Project?

The Hidden and Erased BIPOC Histories project was started by

Shavonne Coleman, Kristala Pouncy Smart and Meriah Sage (all alumni of the EMU Applied Drama and Theatre for the Young Program at Eastern Michigan University) and quickly expanded to include Joshua Streeter and Elizabeth Horn. The goal of this project is to uncover hidden and erased persons, facts, experiences in the TYA field and to catalog, celebrate and disseminate these narratives. We hope to develop a web of researchers across the country, each searching in their own communities and/or areas of interest. We propose working together to find, document and share the names and histories of the BIPOC TYA artists, drama facilitators and practitioners. We recognize that the artists, educators, and leaders we are seeking may identify as storytellers, divisors, educators, social workers, etc. instead of drama or theatre artists. They may have focused on applied drama/theatre, multidisciplinary, or/and community engagement work for multigenerational audiences rather than work formally titled “theatre for young audiences”. Puzzle pieces are currently being shared on cmtadtfy.wixsite.com/histories with the goal of writing articles and a book which celebrates these narratives.

Karamu House

We started digging for narratives in the places we knew. In our published history of the TYA field, there is often one theatre/organization mentioned that centers BIPOC artists: Karamu House. Karamu House, located in Cleveland, Ohio, is the longest continuously running professional African American Theatre in the country. Karamu House is also the most documented Black theatre in children’s theatre history texts. Inspired by settlement houses in Chicago, Karamu House was started in 1905 by Rowena and Russell Jelliffe as the Playhouse Settlement in what was then called Cleveland’s “The Roaring Third” (History, Karamu House). Rowena and Russell, graduates of Oberlin College, were among the first social workers to graduate with sociology degrees from Chicago University’s School of Civics (Newald).

The Jelliffe’s Playhouse Settlement to “establish a common ground where people of different races, religions, and social and economic backgrounds could come together to seek and share common ventures” (Home, Karamu House). The arts were part of the foundation of Playhouse Settlement, and plays began shortly after in

1917. As Black families moved to the North during The Great Migration, many settled in this community. Karamu House became known for adult and children's theatre as well as youth and community programming. In 1941, the Settlement was renamed Karamu House. Karamu is a Swahili word that means “a place of joyful gathering.” Notable artists of Karamu House include Langston Hughes, Ossie Davis, Gilbert Moses, Shirley Graham DuBois, Rudy Dee, Robert Guillaume, Bill Cobbs, Ivan Dixon, and more (Newald).

Karamu continues to thrive today, with a new multi-million dollar grant to support infrastructure and capital improvements. Karamu, now located in Cleveland's Fairfax neighborhood, holds robust educational programming, rich community engagement, and professional productions (Karamu).

Ann K. Flagg

Tucked in the pages of textbooks mentioning Karamu House, there is one BIPOC drama facilitator and TYA Director: Ann K. Flagg. Ann K. Flagg was an American playwright, stage actress, director, public school teacher, and teaching artist. Outside of her work as an educator, she's known to have toured with the American Negro Repertory Players as a stage manager and actor in 1947. Flagg is also known for her work as the director of children's theatre at Karamu House in Cleveland, where she integrated children's theatre, directed, and taught classes from 1952 to 1961. In 1961, Flagg attended Northwestern University for graduate school, studying with Winifred Ward and earning her master's degree in playwriting. During this time, she also taught drama in Evanston Schools, District 65. Ann K. Flagg is best known for her play "Great Gettin' up Mornin'," which aired on CBS television in 1964. Ann is mentioned in Chapter 6 of *Spotlight on the Child*, in Nellie McCaslin's *Theatre for Children in the United States: A History*, and in Winifred Ward's introduction to *Children and Drama* by Nellie McCaslin. There is an AATE award named for Ann K. Flagg which honors “an individual, organization or company who has made significant contributions to the field of theatre/drama for youth or arts education dealing with multicultural issues and/or reaching diverse audiences and constituencies”(AATE).

We went to Arizona to explore The Theatre for Youth and Community Collection (previously known as Child Drama Collection) at

the Arizona State University, specifically looking into Ann K. Flagg's archives there. We also visited the Karamu House archives located in Cleveland at the Kelvin Smith Library at Case Western Reserve University, and the Ann Flagg and Winifred Ward archives at Northwestern University. While at the Ann K. Flagg and Karamu House Archives, we uncovered programs with artists names, as well as details about Ann K. Flagg's "Magic Carpet Room", images from production, letters from students, drama lesson plans, scripts, and speeches (Abookire). There were many letters to and from Winifred Ward, confirming Ward's respect and admiration for Ann. In *Children and Drama*, Winifred Ward states that Ann was "...the most remarkable teacher of creative drama we ever had in Evanston" (Ward, xxviii). A 1964 article entitled *Drama Class Aides Deprived Children* frames the Black Urban students as struggling or deprived but Anne K. Flagg uses the specific term, "culturally deprived" to describe the state of the Black child in a White-centered educational system. She mentions experiences and terms like; low self-estimation, self-hate, self-contempt, and self-discipline which all can be tied back to another one of her observations among these students, "culturally deprived students often experience alienation from society" (Austin). Flagg, in the 1950s was using creative dramatics to turn these negatives around and create or build not only IQ but EQ, something that only recently mainstreamed in our education system through the rise of 'socio-emotional learning' programs and classes.

Rosa Lee Scott

In the Theatre for Youth and Community archives at Arizona State University, we also found images and letters documenting connections of Ann K. Flagg to others including director/educator Rose Lee Scott, an activist who started as a young artist in shows with and assistant to Flagg on several shows who went on to study at Colorado College and mime, pantomime and commedia dell'arte in Paris at the L'École Jacque Lecoq. Later Rosa Lee Scott facilitated drama programs at The New York Encampment for Citizenship. Scott was awarded a grant in the 1970s to study creative drama in England and France. In 1973, Scott was invited as a United States delegate to the ASSITEJ (International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People, or, L'Association internationale du théâtre pour l'enfance et de la

jeunesse) Congress in Venice, Italy (Ross).

Connections & Puzzle Pieces

Until recently, there were little to no widely available anthologies or history textbooks highlighting Black and Brown artists in TYA. *Palabras del Cielo: An Exploration of Latina/o Theatre for Young Audiences* was published in 2018, compiled by Josè Casas and edited by Christina Marín was the first of its kind, holding both plays and scholarship by Latine playwrights. In 2025, *Every Great Dream* an Anthology of African American playwrights and scholars will be released, also being the first of its kind specific to Black TYA. Due to the segregated nature of our country’s past, the hope is that many more of these BIPOC focused anthologies will be published as a push toward radical inclusion, appreciation, and a new reality where BIPOC history is every American’s history.

To uncover these hidden and erased histories, we found ourselves seeking information outside of the TYA field. In the book *Profiles of African American Stage Performers and Theatre People, 1816-1960* by B. Peterson, Jr. highlights select drama teachers, performers, playwrights and educators. Exploring the text, we discovered the names of Irene Colbert Edmunds, Olivia Ward Bush-Banks, Oscoela Archer, Vignette Carroll, Mary Burrell, Angela Grimke: all connected to children’s theatre and/or theatre education.

In exploring the text *Plays and Pageants from the Life of a Negro* by Willis Richardson, we discovered playwrights and educators Inez Burke (an elementary school teacher in Washington D.C. and playwright of *Two Races*), Mary Frances Gunner (educator, YWCA worker, and playwright of *Light of the Women* which included such heroines as Sojourner Truth and Phillis Wheatley), May Miller (high school teacher and one of the most widely published female playwrights in Harlem Renaissance) and more.

Once the names were uncovered, information on these artists and educators was, in many cases, not difficult to find. They were there: hidden just beyond view. For example, further searching into Irene Colbert Edmunds uncovered she not only was a teacher, youth theatre leader, director and playwright in children’s theatre, she wrote articles in SADA’s *Encore* including “An Experiment in Creative Dramatics” and participated in the Children’s Theatre and Allied Arts Conference.

Following bread crumbs, we discovered a full dissertation about Irene Colbert Edmunds, written by Dr. Valencia Eloris Matthews.

One mention of Olivia Ward Bush-Banks' "School of Expression" in Profiles of African American Stage Performers and Theatre People, 1816-1960 revealed that she identified as African-American and Native American Montaukett (Guillaume). She worked as a drama teacher at Abyssinian Baptist Church's Community Center, the assistant theatre director at Robert Gould Shaw Settlement House during the great depression, taught theatre with the Chicago Public Schools and wrote many poems and plays including the play Indian Trails: or Trail of the Montauk (Wilson). She held salons at her home supporting African American artists and started her "School of Expression" which focused on "dramatic arts, public speaking, and cultural dramatics for children" (Poise is Power).

In digging into Hull House records, we came up empty regarding BIPOC Theatre/drama facilitators, but found a typed/handwritten script called "Halsted Street" devised in 1939 by Viola Spolin and members of the Hull House community. Each scene was a different stop on the Halsted Street trolley line and every stop told a different story. One theater critic from the Chicago Daily News described the show, "There were about 150 people in the cast: Italians, Greeks, Mexicans, Negroes, and I don't know what other racial strains. ...The important thing about it was that it was conceived, written, and played by the people themselves ..." (O'Brein). We also discovered evidence of Black Settlement Houses with theatre/drama programs such as the Richard Gould Shaw Settlement (Boston), South Side Community Service (Chicago), and Clotee Scott Settlement (Chicago), Phyllis Wheatley House (Minneapolis) and Parkway Community House (Chicago).

Theory Absent of the Diversity of Practice

There is a theory that is reasonable to operate from, there were plenty of Black and Brown practitioners that have been doing TYA in America even before what is often considered the recorded start of the field in the Settlement Houses of the 1900s (Bedard). If we consider the state of America during the 1900s, we could imagine that TYA practitioners or companies doing it may have experienced one or more of these barriers:

1. They were not in the position to separate their production work by age. Quite possibly intergenerational work or family friendly shows may have served this need despite lack of infrastructure, resources, or anyone being interested in documenting this work.
2. Due to the lack of resources, in a segregated and redlined America, Black and Brown communities that had not assimilated into white culture may have only had access to theatre with children by integrating it with education or human services.
3. Due to the communal nature of many of these cultures, they may not have wanted to separate the idea of children’s theatre (theatre for children) or youth theatre (theatre with children) as a genre but felt the term theatre was all encompassing of these.

If we operate under this theory, it becomes much easier to identify professional artists and educators that may not regularly be included in our classes and texts. For example, Osceola McCarthy Adams (Osceola Archer) who was an artist, activist, and educator is coined as being one of the first Black women on Broadway though she also worked at the Harlem School of the Arts as a drama teacher. Irene Colbert Edmonds, another that rarely graces the pages of our anthologies or textbooks, established the first children’s theatre at an HBCU, Dillard University in 1935. We are not necessarily looking for companies or artists, we are also looking for programs in church basements, at neighborhood recreation centers, or settlement houses by artists, teachers, and social workers. There is a privilege that needs to be recognized that allows us to have a professional focus of TYA, or to deem ourselves solely a TYA scholar or creator. The historical reality was that Black and Brown artists and audiences didn’t have equal access to space, money, or other resources including childcare, publishers, and libraries. The Global majority were not typically the archivists of dominant culture, limiting the ‘scholarly’ documentation of their existence. Accepting, acknowledging, and activating this theory has cultivated an open invitation to stop assuming what feels or is blatantly presented as absent as objective truth and traverse like Indiana Jones into the tombs which hold what, subjectively was deemed less than, subversive, or ‘not a good fit’ toward the goal of upholding neocolonialism nicely and neatly defined as field-specific

practice.

Navigating The Tombs & The Privilege of Designations

What then is the responsibility, level of accountability, and necessity in our field, research, and/or practice? We expect ‘serious’ artists to know that Stanislavsky sprouted Michael Chekhov, Meisner, and Adler among many others. Why don’t we just as readily teach that from Ann K. Flagg propagated artists like Gilbert Moses? Moses, who attended classes and performed at Karamu House, grew up to be a Broadway performer, playwright (*Roots*), film actor and one of the founders of the Free Southern Theatre, was a student of Ann K. Flagg. Moses worked with Flagg on classes and productions from age nine through high school. He stated "Ann was a great transmitter of love, and the power of self-potential, self-discipline and self-control through the process of creating a character, or a prop, or a costume" (Abookire, 189). When looking at Ann’s “Magic Carpet Room” and her “pillow circle” where “children would...take a pillow from a large hamper in the corner and each child would sit on the pillow while Flagg or an older member of Student Theatre read to the group: Sometimes we would read to each other, or ourselves and then we would act out the stories” (Abookire, 191). It makes perfect sense that this young artist would grow up to found Free Southern Theatre and help to develop Story Circles, where “audiences and actors sat together in circles to share personal stories evoked by the show” (Cooper Davis, 128).

The lack of representation in mainstream or dominant culture notoriety, reveals where we place value in this field. The absence of publication in academic journals or conference records has limited the inclusion of BIPOC names in citational practice alluding to a false reality that this history is minimal or non-existent. Privilege is in “presence” when presence requires acceptance from others or assimilation for pacification of systems meant to exclude, oppress, and depress. Therefore many histories may be written, photographed, recorded, or stuffed in boxes un-designated or identified only by ‘multicultural’, ‘race-specific. ‘Human services’ for those deemed less-than-human. The act of digging through the tombs is not only to prove value but to gain knowledge on the practices that have bound us to segregation decades after Jim Crow. The act of uncovering is not only an ‘AH-HA!’ moment but also an intentional act to dismantle systems

that say only certain work or certain beings are enough. As a result, our responsibility becomes not only to illuminate these histories and make them readily available, but also to serve as a conduit to our commitment to build new ways of documenting and knowing. The past BIPOC TYA leaders, Anne K. Flagg, Osceola Archer, Olivia Ward Bush-Banks, and Irene Colbert Edmonds along with the present visionaries: Jose Casas, Tiffany Trent, Reiko Ho, Gloria Bond Clunie, Larissa Fasthose, Paige Hernandez, Johamy Morales, Idris Goodwin, Cheryl L. West among many many others should inspire us. Through their work and their presence, the weight of what previously was considered “absence” should change our approach to citational practices, mitigate our language biases, and reposition our stances on expectations and excellence. To occupy is to move away from the status quo as we confront the realities of how narrow our documentation and datasets are due to dominance, eurocentrism, and neoliberalism.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Shavonne Coleman (she/they) is a Detroit-based fabulist, teaching/performing artist, director, writer, and dramaturg specializing in applied theatre. They are currently an Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan and continue to work across community, artistic, and educational spaces. Their recent past includes serving as the Director for Theatre for Dialogue and Assistant Director for Transformative Learning at University of Texas, respectively. They gained recognition

for transformative learning. Shavonne has directed youth performances internationally, contributed to TYA Today, and received the Ann K. Flagg Multicultural Award from AATE. Currently, they are adapting *Your Name is a Song*, written by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow for Seattle Children's Theatre and developing an original piece entitled *Cause Play* as part of the TYA BIPOC Superheroes Project commissioned by Spinning Dot Theatre and Eastern Michigan University. Shavonne strives to challenge the status quo in theatre, centering approaches that prioritize the human experience, equity, access, and creative exploration.

Meriah Sage, M.F.A. (she/her) is an Associate Professor, Director of Applied Drama and Theatre for the Young MFA/MA Program, and Director of Theatre at Eastern Michigan University. Meriah also works as a director, actor, and teaching artist who enjoys telling stories focused on social justice, human tenacity, and the power of imagination. She is a certified teacher in the Michael Chekhov technique through the Great Lakes Michael Chekhov Consortium (GLMCC), an approach that enhances her directing and teaching by emphasizing imagination, physicality, and psychological gesture. Her versatile background spans across acting, directing, and education, and she is dedicated to fostering artistic and personal growth in her students and the communities she serves. Before her tenure at Eastern Michigan University, Meriah worked in various capacities in theatre, education, community engagement, and artistic direction. She served as an Assistant Professor/Director of Theatre at the University of Findlay, as the Education Director for the Auditorium Theatre at Roosevelt University, as the Artistic Director for Theatre for Young Audiences at Apple Tree Theatre on Chicago's North Shore, and managing director for the Aesthetic Education Program with Education for the Arts. Meriah has also worked as a Teaching Artist/Facilitator with organizations such as Lincoln Center Institute (National Educators Workshops and Teaching Artist Mentoring Program), Education for the Arts, and the International Thespians Festival. Meriah is honored to have been the first recipient of the Don and Elizabeth Doyle Fellowship.