

## **"You Hip to Buffalo?" The Hidden Heritage of Black Theatre in Western New York** Virginia Anderson

We're makin' it to Buffalo, man. You hip to Buffalo?  
CURT IN ED BULLINS'S *Goin' a Buffalo*

Identity: one's history, one's memories, one's sense of self in relation to others. The subtitle of Anna Deveare Smith's *Fires in the Mirror—Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*—*suggests* that geographical location may function as a carrier of each of these personal elements.<sup>1</sup> Buffalo, New York, a city with a reputation for failed dreams,<sup>2</sup> bears a cultural heritage that has shaped the thinking and representations of generations of African Americans. Four moments in the city's history demonstrate how the portrayals of and performances by African Americans in and around the city reflected changes in both local society and national ideological trends. First, in 1842 the city served as a springboard for the international success of Christy's Minstrels, one of the first "make-believe negro bands of singers and musicians."<sup>3</sup> The second instance is that of the Buffalo Historical Marionettes, formed in 1932. Despite their important contribution to the Federal Theatre, the troupe's eight African American performers have received little scholarly attention. The third area of focus involves a dramaturgical analysis of Ed Bullins's *Goin' a Buffalo*. The play was written in 1966 within the context of Buffalo's Second Great Migration, a movement that gives richer meaning to the characters' struggles. Finally, the 1978 formation of Buffalo's still-thriving Ujima Company provided the city with African American theatre that demanded recognition for its predominantly black artists and black themes. Analysis of the social, economic, and political context in which each of these theatrical events originated engenders a nuanced understanding of not only the events themselves but how the history of

western New York represents the evolution of African American history and performance across the nation.

Before turning to industry, Buffalo served as a commercial center during the nineteenth century, most significantly demonstrated by the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. The canal connected the Great Lakes with the eastern seaboard, allowing the shipment of products both east and west of the terminus. As Neil Kraus explains in his study of community power in Buffalo, "the canal made Buffalo the largest inland port in the United States. With the completion of railroad construction a few decades later, Buffalo's role as a major center of trade was solidified."<sup>4</sup> Prior to the canal's opening, the first theatrical performance advertised in a Buffalo newspaper took place among military men, none of them black, on March 17, 1815.<sup>5</sup> In 1828, fifty-eight African Americans lived in Buffalo, working as servants, barbers, laborers, and boat stewards.<sup>6</sup> Evidence of community cohesion can be found in the 1831 formation of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Buffalo became an official city shortly thereafter, in 1832.<sup>7</sup>

In the years that followed, Buffalo struggled to define its identity in relation to better-established cities like Albany and New York City. Perhaps the insecurity felt by its inhabitants made the city particularly vulnerable to the cultural impact of a performance by T. D. Rice.<sup>8</sup> In his historical memoir, *Home History*, Samuel M. Welch recalls, In August '35, at the old Eagle Street Theatre,<sup>9</sup> Mr. Rice, known as the original 'Jim Crow Rice: sang and jumped 'Jim Crow,' in negro character; the first negro song of the stage, from which sprang that afterwards popular branch of entertainment, 'negro minstrelsy'."<sup>10</sup> Already wildly successful financially, Rice was in the middle of a national tour that would eventually lead him abroad. With his established reputation, Rice undoubtedly inspired his audience; yet to establish their place within the growing nation,

white, middle-class Buffalonians sought to elevate their sense of themselves, and thereby their city, by supporting and developing performance that denigrated African Americans. Rice's appearance at the Eagle Street Theatre set a powerful cultural precedent.

Within this fertile atmosphere, the group that was to become famous as Christy's Minstrels performed in a tavern-theater on the Buffalo waterfront in 1842. The group consisted of Edwin P. Christy, George Christy (Harrington), L. Durand, and T. Vaughn.<sup>11</sup> Local legend attributes the Minstrels' success to James "Peg-Leg" Harrison, a one-legged black man "of towering height, prodigious strength and amazing musical talents."<sup>12</sup> Conductor and soloist of the Vine Street Black Methodist Church, Harrison may have collaborated with E. P. and George Christy just prior to the Minstrels' formation, providing them with the stories and songs of the Deep South as well as the "down South" talk and plantation dances seen in their performance. Whether or not the story of Peg-Leg Harrison's influence is true, the circulation of the story lent authenticity to their act, serving to legitimate its stereotypes of the "lazy" or "lascivious" black man.

After an initial period of acclimation, Buffalo audiences of all social levels engaged in the entertainment provided by Christy's Minstrels. William A. Porter, the last surviving member of the troupe, recounted that "the idea was a new one and the people of good society were inclined to look askance at a performance that delineated 'Jim Crow'."<sup>13</sup> The Minstrels did not have to wait long for their success. In a 1924 interview, Mrs. Elizabeth Leavitt Keiler recounted early childhood memories of the minstrels: "Everybody got talking about this new kind of show and the uptown people wanted to *see* it. So Christy brought his troupe up on Main Street and the town simply went mad over his performances. I myself remember seeing him dance and sing with his blackened face." Keller further explains that Christy's act became all the rage to the point that friends passing on the street would greet each other with exchanges from the shows they had seen: "We had never heard of

conundrums before the minstrels brought them here. But after that the whole city began asking such questions and they became quite a feature of the children's parties."<sup>14</sup> Minstrelsy, a phenomenon across the nation, had found a home in Buffalo,

The influence of Christy's Minstrels would permeate Buffalo society even after the troupe left the city to seek their immense fortune. In his recollections of dancing in early Buffalo society, Welch explained that *the* normally social and graceful cotillion or quadrille would become "very lively, as . . . our old leaders ... would now and then give us a set of 'Christy's' negro melodies arranged for a quadrille, selections of which would include the airs of: 'Old Uncle *Ned*; 'Dandy Jim, "Rose of Alabama; 'Lucy Long, "Old Dan Tucker; etc."<sup>15</sup> Stereotypes presented by Christy had found their way into everyday discourse.

Christy's paved the way for other minstrel groups to tour through Buffalo, such as the American Minstrels, Rumsey's Minstrels, and Ward and Vokes. An undated playbill for the American Minstrels held at the Buffalo Historical Society notes an act with "The Three Crows" and a "negro song and dance" called "Angels Meet Me." Rurnsey's Minstrels also toured through Buffalo, where they performed an act that included "The Four Crows" and a conclusion of the "Expedition of the Black Brigade!" Minstrelsy remained popular in western New York through 1940, when the Kiwanis Minstrels performed in Geneva in black-face with one black performer.

While local audiences were prepared to support white minstrels' impressions of blackness onstage<sup>16</sup>, actual black performers faced insurmountable obstacles, no matter their talent. Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (1809-76), an African American from Natchez, Michigan, established her reputation as a professional soloist through an 1851 appearance before the Buffalo Music Association. Critics quickly dubbed her "the Black Swan," presumably as a racist compliment on her grace rather than a comparison of her singing to the large birds' honking sound. Over the next

two years Greenfield toured the northern states, and in 1854 she visited England to give a command performance for Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace. Despite the critical acclaim she received, her singing career was brief due to lack of wide public support in the United States.<sup>17</sup> Despite pervasive racism in Buffalo's general population, some of the most important serious African American thinking in the country emerged from the city. In fact, Buffalo has long served as the site where pivotal political and ideological foundations have been laid for African Americans nationwide. In 1843, just one year after Christy's Minstrels formed, the city hosted the National Convention of Colored Citizens of the United States. The most noted event to take place during the convention was a debate between former slave Frederick Douglass and college-educated minister Henry Highland Garnett on whether or not slavery should be overthrown by force.<sup>18</sup> The conference reflected the lack of confidence African Americans had in federal, state, and local governments to care for their condition. Buffalo historian Lillian Serece Williams argues that the most significant aspect of these debates was the clear indication that "the new generation of African Americans would insist on speaking for themselves."<sup>19</sup> Forty people attended, including William Wells Brown, a mulatto who had moved his family to Buffalo to and work on steamboats. The author of many books and several plays, Brown *led* the abolitionist movement in Buffalo and inspired others nationwide.<sup>20</sup>

An important event for the city of Buffalo and national impressions of African Americans took place approximately fifty years later when Buffalo proudly hosted the Pan American Exposition of 1901. White organizers planned two exhibits to represent African and African American communal life: "The African Village," in which inhabitants were portrayed as primitive beings, and the "Old Plantation," depicting southern slavery. Buffalo's Phyllis Wheatley Club of Colored Women publicly denounced the planned exhibits on November 12, 1900. Due to their

adamant protest, especially that of Mary Talbert and Mrs. John Dover a third exhibit was added: "The Negro Exhibit." Extolling the progress made by African Americans over one hundred years, the exhibit included such accomplishments as more than three hundred books written by black authors, models of inventions, and documentation of scientific and mathematical contributions. People from all over the country, indeed the world, witnessed this and other exhibits and presumably acquired what was likely a new awareness of African Americans' contributions to American culture.

Further national and enduring change would be born in Buffalo through the foundation of the Niagara Movement, so named for its place of origin; the group held its organizational meeting July 11-14, 1905, in the Buffalo-Niagara region.<sup>21</sup> Twenty-nine members, including W. E. B. Du Bois, attended this meeting of protest and demand for change. They chose Buffalo for three primary reasons: it was the eighth-largest city in America, it had excellent rail connections, and it bore symbolic value because of western New York's role as a major crossing point in the Underground Railroad, Although the city's black population was relatively small at the time, it provided enthusiastic support to the organization.<sup>22</sup> Formed to make Americans aware of the discrimination and violence imposed on black citizens, the Niagara Movement would pave the way for the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) five years later.

A high-class African American magazine with national aspirations began publication in the city shortly after the formation of the Niagara Movement. In 1906, *The Gazetteer and Guide*, a "Monthly Colored Magazine," claimed devotion to "Literature, Facts, Fiction, and Industrialism of the Afro-American Race Throughout the United States." The magazine appears to have self-consciously depicted a life that most African Americans would not have had at the time, but a life

to strive toward, as illustrated by its subheading, "Our Success Beyond Our Sanguine Expectations, Built Upon Honor and Encouraged by Merit." While daily life in the Niagara region was quite different from that depicted on the glossy pages of *The Gazetteer*, the Buffalo-based magazine projected to its readers an image of African American life that provided a sense of possibility where obstacles may have otherwise blinded them.

[Insert Figures 1-3]

At the turn of the century, the marginalization of African Americans across the country could be felt geographically, economically and culturally, Buffalo's Lower East Side housed the relatively small black community, integrated with Italian and Jewish Americans. Even the two areas with the largest populations of blacks (census tracts 14 and 15), were still 45 percent and 84 percent white, respectively.<sup>23</sup> Between 1900 and 1940, African Americans were generally unable to penetrate the discrimination that prevented them from participating in the region's rapid industrial expansion. As Kraus notes in his study of Buffalo social politics, African Americans were frequently employed as strikebreakers and usually achieved "only temporary gains in industrial employment as a result of increased wartime production and not because of a change in racial attitudes on the part of white employers and unions."<sup>24</sup> Further aggression became palpable when the Ku Klux Klan took hold of the Buffalo region between 1922 and 1924.<sup>25</sup> Racist sentiments remaining well after the Klan's decline likely prompted the discrimination that remained in all aspects of Buffalo's economy, including the performing arts. For example, as depicted in a 1929 photograph found at the Buffalo Historical Society, black men worked as porters and maintenance workers while white men served as ushers at Shea's Buffalo Theater, the city's most opulent theatre. Discrimination, however, was not restricted to Buffalo's high-end theaters. As in most American cities, vaudeville became immensely popular in Buffalo during the early twentieth century.

Although not explicitly prohibited from participating in the form, African Americans appear to have made billing only when they exploited the expectations associated with their skin color. Documentation of African American theatre in the area acknowledges only touring troupes, suggesting that local acts found few opportunities or willing audiences. Among several 1897 listings for "Touring Musical, Dramatic, Vaudeville, and Variety Companies," only James Smith's Colored Burlesque Comedy received recognition as a black ensemble.<sup>26</sup> By the 1920s, however, local African Americans penetrated the Buffalo-area vaudeville circuit. Robert B. Joplin is noted in the 1922 *Julius Cahn-Gus Hill Thecuriad Guide* as manager of Buffalo's McEvoy Theater-Vaudeville House, the words "African American" appearing prominently after his name.<sup>27</sup> Whether this note was intended to help patrons and potential acts to choose a venue is unclear.

Pervasive discrimination like that encountered in the vaudeville circuit may be the reason that one of the most innovative groups of black artists working in the Federal Theatre of the 1930s, the Buffalo Historical Marionettes, remains generally unacknowledged. Following the crash of 1929, American citizens of every race found themselves unemployed and struggling to support families and maintain dignity. The residents of Buffalo were no exception. Relief lines stretched around city blocks, and people clamored for the jobs available to them through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Roosevelt's New Deal to help restore America's economy and optimism. The Federal Theatre Project, a branch of the WPA headed by Hallie Flanagan, was designed with two primary purposes: to provide employment to thousands of out-of-work practitioners, and to make theatre available to the masses for the first time. This was to be a theatre for everyone, with free or low-cost seats available to destitute people across the country. Veteran stage actress Rose McClendon worked with Flanagan to create Negro Units within the project. Following the established examples of the Harlem Experimental Theatre and the Krigwa Players, McClendon's aim

was to create theatre by, for, and about African Americans while providing opportunities for advancement through mentorship and experience.

The Buffalo Historical Marionettes was not an official Negro Unit. Created by Esther Wilhelm in January 1933, the troupe consisted of eight African Americans, five men and three women, who presented plays with historical themes to music. The performers likely influenced the content of the plays produced; of particular note is a production that depicted the Battle of Put-in-Bay of 1813, a historic event often cited by historians of black culture as a point of pride for the bravery with which the black sailors fought alongside Admiral Perry. Their repertoire further included such plays as *The Life of Stephen Foster*, *Eh Whitney—The Invention of the Cotton Gin*, *Romance of National Anthems*, *Abraham Lincoln*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Tremendously popular in the community, the Buffalo Historical Marionettes performed in schools, playgrounds, orphanages, and even on the radio.<sup>28</sup>

The masking of the puppet theater hid the skin color of its talented performers so that only when the puppets were put down were the performers acknowledged as African American. The performers, without marionettes, adopted the communal persona of the Jubilee Singers. A subdivision of the Buffalo Historical Marionettes, their act is described in the repertoire as if it consisted of different performers entirely: "This group of Negro Singers tell the origin of Negro Spirituals from the landing of the first boat-load of slaves up to the present time."<sup>29</sup> The Jubilee Singers' act was popular, but likely so because it conformed to general audience expectations by playing into perceived exoticism of black performers.

It appears that the Caucasian organizers of the Buffalo Historical Marionettes deliberately downplayed the race of its performers. A publicity photo of the Buffalo Historical Marionettes has three white women as subjects.<sup>30</sup> One of them, Esther Wilhelm, manipulates a marionette of a girl in

a white dress. On the shelf behind them, as if standing in for one of the actual African American performers, is a black marionette. It could be that a photograph of a black performer "manipulating" a white puppet may have been viewed as subversive, despite the fact that such was reality within the troupe's performances. Discussion of the actual (black) puppeteers is similarly conspicuously absent from Joseph Betzer's June 26, 1937, article, "They Pull Strings and Puppets Do the Rest."<sup>31</sup>

[Insert Figure 4]

The article addresses all other aspects of production and touts the unit's success, but Betzer's headline leaves the reader to wonder who "they" are that pull the strings.

Only a retrospective article printed fifty years later acknowledged the race of the puppeteers. In his article "The Marionettes of the W.P.A." For *Doll Reader* magazine, Robert W. Zimmerman declares Buffalo the birthplace of the Puppet Project of the WPA. Describing the unit's inaugural production of *Eli Whitney and His Cotton Gin*, Zimmerman writes, "the five-act play, which chronicled the rise of industry in the American South, featured a cast of five black puppeteers who sang and manipulated 14 puppets to the accompaniment of an instrumental quintet."<sup>32</sup> Such a point, presented by Zimmerman as matter of fact in 1988, was likely more controversial in 1934 when the production premiered.

In the instances when the race of the performers of the Buffalo Historical Marionettes has been acknowledged, critics generally misrepresented the troupe.<sup>33</sup> Again, without their puppets, performers used in other productions became the Jubilee Singers. Yet Zimmerman presents the following as fact: "The Jubilee Singers, as this unit was known, was reported by the *Courier* to be the first all-black professional puppet company to perform in the United States and its parent group, the Buffalo Historical Marionettes, was credited to be a truly unique experimental

program in the field of work relief."<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, African Americans in western New York made vital contributions to the nation's theatre throughout the 1930s.<sup>35</sup>

Black residents' lack of representation in local government may indicate why the contemporary local press and later historians have passed over the city as a significant contributor to African Americans' role in the Federal Theatre Project. From the 1930s to the 1950s, the African American community in Buffalo became increasingly segregated and, as Kraus explained in his study, black citizens experienced "little or no representation on any relevant decision-making bodies within city government."<sup>36</sup> By 1940, African Americans in Buffalo numbered around 17,000, or only 2.4 percent of the total population.<sup>37</sup>

The era of the Federal Theatre behind them, more than 75,000 black people relocated to Buffalo between 1940 and 1970 during what would be known as the Second Great Migration of African Americans from the South.<sup>38</sup> During this period the proportion of African Americans rose from 2.4 to 20.4 percent of the city's population.<sup>39</sup> This increase demonstrates the value and opportunity African Americans perceived to be there. Read or seen outside of its historical context, Ed Bullins's *Goin' a Buffalo* may appear to be an existential drama in which a group of hustlers and prostitutes yearn to leave one disenfranchised city to seek impossible success in another. However, Bullins's choice of Buffalo should not be viewed as arbitrary. Written in 1966, the play reflects this important historical period of mass migration.

Like other African Americans around the country during the Second Great Migration, the characters in *Goin' a Buffalo* dream of starting over, albeit dealing drugs, in a new town:

CURT (*lights cigarette and inhales fiercely. Drops head. Two beat pause. In strained voice, holding smoke back*) We're makin' it to Buffalo, man. You hip to Buffalo?

ART No, I don't think so ...

CURT (*takes another drag*) It's a good little hustlin' town, I hear....

PANDORA. (*receiving cigarette from CURT*) It's supposed to be a good link town. A different scene entirely. ...

MAMA Any place is better than L.A. but I heard that Buffalo is really boss.

PANDORA. It sho is, baby.<sup>40</sup>

By sucking on cigarettes, the characters demonstrate how Bullins employs theatrical signification to suggest their literal and figurative suffocation in smog-drenched Los Angeles. Buffalo represents a breath of fresh air.

Despite the optimism felt by those coming to the city, Buffalo was to be no panacea for African Americans seeking to leave their troubles behind. In his study of African Americans in Buffalo since 1940, Henry Louis Taylor Jr. found that black citizens have borne the highest unemployment rate, held the least-desirable jobs, and received the lowest wages in the city.<sup>41</sup> Taylor summarized: "Black Buffalo resided in the city's economic basement."<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, they lived in "the oldest and most dilapidated housing in Buffalo."<sup>43</sup> The characters in Bullins's play yearn to leave a difficult situation in Los Angeles for what would likely be another in Buffalo; importantly, however, they would become part of a community of people in the same situation. Although Bullins may be suggesting that his characters—indeed, the entire wave of migrating African Americans—were deceiving themselves by dreaming of a better life in Buffalo, rich and complex tension is found in the positive historical formation of community with strangers from disparate places, an experience at the root of African American history.<sup>44</sup> Editors James Hatch and Ted Shine compare the situation in Bullins's play to the savings-and-loan scandals of the 1980s, in which "even the most trusted and respected members of our society are capable of cruel and unscrupulous measures in their search for the almighty dollar."<sup>45</sup> Such

a comparison may be useful thematically, but Bullins wrote the play twenty years earlier, when a different kind of zeitgeist was at work.

Another element of *Goin' a Buffalo*, Pandora's dream of becoming a singer, finds illumination in its placement within the city's historical context. When Bullins wrote the play, the reputation of Buffalo's Colored Musician's Club was well established. After being excluded from the white musicians' union, the city's black musicians banded together in 1917 to organize Local no. 533, a racially segregated musicians' union, and established its Union Hall, which still stands today and plays host to touring musicians. The club itself was not chartered until 1935, and "during the '30s, '40s, and '50s, any musician that came through Buffalo had to check in with the Colored Musicians' Club."<sup>46</sup> Visiting artists included Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, and Ella Fitzgerald, and everyone jammed with local musicians. The club would have been a true destination for Pandora, and she—and Bullins's first audiences—would have known it.

Despite economic hardship, the 1960s were a culturally and socially fertile decade for African Americans in Buffalo. During this time, many of the over six hundred black community organizations now found in Buffalo were formed, including churches, cultural and civil rights groups, educational institutions, and block clubs." Frequently geographically constrained to one ghettoized section of other cities, these organizations pervaded Buffalo. Their geographical inclusion may have contributed to the feeling that Buffalo was a "black" city, not just host to one particular enclave.

[Insert Figure 5]

Home to a buzzing music scene and other cultural institutions, Buffalo still lacked a theatrical forum for black artists. In a 1963 editorial for one of Buffalo's African American newspapers, the *Buffalo Challenger*, Adolph Dupree bluntly asked, "What's Wrong with Negro Theater?"<sup>48</sup> He concludes that the problems Faced by black theatre practitioners were no different

from those faced by white ones; they were just "much bigger." He specifically identifies three gaping holes preventing African American theatre from taking off in Buffalo and around the country: lack of technical experience, lack of black actors auditioning for jobs (although he acknowledged a shift in this trend), and perhaps most importantly, a lack of community and financial support. These problems were certainly felt in Buffalo, where the African Cultural Center was the only significant venue for black performers. Ed Smith, a resident actor at the Studio Arena Theater and the African Cultural Center's drama coach, wrote a similar mandate for the city in 1969: "There are now forty or more black theaters existing across the nation. Where the population of blacks is massive, there should be a black theater. Buffalo is such a town: The talent is here, the community wants it and the colleges need it."<sup>49</sup> Nine years after Smith's editorial was published in the *Buffalo Evening News*, actress and writer Lorna C. Hill answered his call.<sup>50</sup>

On December 15, 1978, Hill founded the Ujima Company as the theatre component of the (now-defunct) Center for Positive Thought School of Movement and Dance. Well aware of a drastic increase in the percentage of African Americans in Buffalo's total population,<sup>51</sup> she responded to Smith's mandate and to the problems identified by Dupree by inviting nearly thirty artists, predominantly African Americans,<sup>52</sup> to attend meetings and workshops with the expectation that an ensemble would form and become a professional company. The company established its reputation by developing and performing original works written and directed by Hill that combined Afro-Caribbean folklore, African American literature, and African American song and dance, "Ujima" is Swahili for "collective work and responsibility" and reflects a felt duty to African American heritage as well as the ensemble nature of the historically multitasking company; actors for one show will stage-manage, work the box office, or build sets for another. Such collective action suits the purpose of Ujima, Hill explains, which is to link African

Americans in Buffalo to their heritage and to one another: "At the center of it all is building the beloved community....Other theatres can do something different, and that's okay; I support that, I understand that, I go to see that. But we can't afford that, not just as African Americans, but as modern man. We need cultural institutions that build community, and our part is to make sure that African American theatre exists."<sup>53</sup> Ujima specializes in plays both performed and written by African Americans, promoting its repertoire as a "diverse spread of scripts from the familiar African American canon, lesser known works by African American authors, premiers of new works, standard works of Western theater, and contemporary American theater."<sup>54</sup>

Despite the company's mission, Ujima audiences historically have been Caucasian, a fact that may be a consequence of the theater's location. Had Hill sought to complete W. E. B. Du Bois's mandate of theatre about, by, for, and *near* African Americans, the increasing population density of African Americans in Buffalo's East Side would have made that area a logical choice.<sup>55</sup> Instead, Ujima is "tucked into fashionable Elmwood Avenue, amid the boutiques, the bistros and the bookstores."<sup>56</sup> In a 1989 interview with Rose Ciotta for the *Buffalo News*, Hill acknowledges the makeup of her audiences: "I wish now that more black people would come to the theater. We do so much that speaks to them."<sup>57</sup> Twenty years later, this problem remains; Hill observes that the racial demographics of Ujima's audiences tend to reflect the proportion of African Americans within the city's overall population, adding that "certain plays attract a majority of one race or another because of content."<sup>58</sup>

Ujima continues to thrive in Buffalo, boasting the longest-standing acting ensemble of any theatrical organization in the city. Despite its success, the company faces challenges similar to those experienced by African Americans throughout the history of the city, and indeed the nation. While Hill blames institutionalized racism for inequity in public funding of the company,

she gratefully acknowledges the role of local audiences: "The citizenry supports us as much as can be expected. I can't ask any more from the citizenry.... The inequities exist in cultural funding. People regardless of age, regardless of color, who want a broader life view, come to our theatre. They are our primary support mechanism. I can't ask them for another thing."<sup>59</sup>

True to historical precedent, Buffalo serves as an exporter of contemporary African American theatre. Pieces that begin as workshopped productions at Ujima frequently find production elsewhere. The company presented the world premiere of Dr. Endesha Ida Mae Holland's *The Mississippi Delta*, a play nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama. Hill's play *Yalta Bitch* was the only play by a Buffalo writer selected as part of the 1988 First International Women Playwright's Conference. Hill describes the play as "a celebration of myself, my individuality, my universality (with other women)."<sup>60</sup> Perhaps it is this kind of universality found throughout Ujima's work that demonstrates how African American culture in Buffalo continues to permeate outward to affect other places, as it has throughout the city's history.

Interwoven with the challenges of the past, the struggles facing Buffalo's African Americans today remain on both sides of the footlights. From T. D. Rice's visit to the city in 1835 to the success of Christy's Minstrels in the 1840s, from the failed recognition of the Buffalo Historical Marionettes as a contribution of African Americans to the Federal Theatre Project to the grounding of Ed Bullins's *Goin' a Buffalo*, and finally, including the ongoing struggles and successes of Lorna Hill's Ujima Company, the stories that have emerged from the city form an identity for African Americans not only in the city itself, but across the nation. As Curt suggests in Bullins's play, in order to further uncover the hidden heritage of African Americans in the United States, we must first make ourselves "hip to Buffalo."

## Notes

I would like to acknowledge the generous critical feedback of respondents, including Ann-Marie Bean, as earlier versions of this essay were honored with first place in the graduate division of the Black Theatre Network's S. Randolph Edmonds Young Scholars Competition and selection for the Theatre History Focus Group's debut panel for the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.

The epigraph is from Ed Rullins's *Goin' a Buffalo, in Black Theatre USA: The Recent Period, 1937—Today*, ed. James V. Hatch and Ted Shine (New York: Free Press, 1996), 401.

1. Anna Deveare Smith, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other identities* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993).
2. Librettist Terrance McNalley Americanized the film-turned-Broadway musical *The Full Monty* by moving the action concerning unemployed steelworkers-turned-strippers from a dilapidated steel town in England to Buffalo. New York congressman lack Quinn denounced the production and wrote a strongly worded opposition letter to McNalley, inviting him to visit Buffalo so that he may personally give him a tour of the city and the opportunity to meet its residents. McNalley declined. See Mike Salinas, "Congressman Blasts 'Full Monty,'" *Back Stage* 41, no. 26 (2000): 5.
3. Laris Meloy, "Blackface Comedy a la Minstrel Is Buffalo's Product," *Buffalo Courier Express*, October 19, 1924, "Local History" (scrapbook). vol. 2, p. 282, Grosvenor Collection. Buffalo Public Library.
4. Neil Kraus, *Race, Neighborhoods, and Community Power* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 35.
5. Addressed to "the Officers of the Army, and the Ladies and Gentlemen of Buffalo," the advertisement announced *Tragedy of Douglass* followed by "the much admired Comic Farce, in 2 acts of *The Sleep Walker: or, Which is The Lady?*" Music was to be performed by the Fifth and Sixteenth Regiments. "The Buffalo Stage: Bill of the First Play Acted Here," *Buffalo Courier*, July 8, 1894, 18, cols. 1-4.
6. African Americans arrived in Buffalo well before the planning of the Erie Canal. Joseph Hodge is noted as the first black settler of the Buffalo region, arriving in 1772. Having married an Indian woman, he served as a language interpreter.
7. Although Buffalo officially became a city in 1832, it had been incorporated as a village in 1813.
8. Accounts vary regarding where Rice first "jumped Jim Crow." According to Colonel T. Austin Brown, Rice claimed to copy the walk and dress of "an old negro" in Louisville, Kentucky, around 1929. Brown, "The Origins of Minstrelsy," in *Fun in Black. or Sketches of Minstrel Life*. ed. Charles H. Day (New York: De Witt, 1874), 44. However, Alexander Saxton claims that it was not until 1831 that Rice imitated "a shuffle he had seen performed by a black man on the Cincinnati levee." Saxton, "Blackface Minstrelsy," in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*,; ed. Annemarie Bean (Hanover, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996) 69. Regardless of its foundation, Rice's blackface, highly physical routine made him a fortune.
9. The Eagle Street Theater, host to touring troupes from around the country, was burned, rebuilt, and renamed several times and in 1865 as St. James Hall. It provided a viewing space for the

- body of Abraham Lincoln from his funeral train. "Buffalo Area," *Marquee: The Journal of the Theatre Historical Society* 31, no. 2 (1999): 15.
10. Samuel M. Welch, *Home History; Recollections of Buffalo during the Decade from 1830 1840, or Fifty Years Since* (Buffalo: Peter Paul and Brothers, 1891), 371.
  11. Brown, "Origins of Minstrelsy," 8.
  12. Marvin A. Rapp, *Canal Water and Whiskey: Tall Tales of the Erie Canal Country* (Buffalo: Heritage Press, 1992), 3.
  13. "Last Survivor of the Old-Time Christy Minstrels-William A. Porter of Wyoming County," *Commercial*. January 20, 1906, "Theaters and Convention Halls in Buffalo" (scrapbook), vol. I, Grosvenor Collection, Buffalo Public Library.
  14. Meloy, "Blackface Comedy."
  15. Welch, *Home History*, 377.
  16. This preference for black character "types" is further demonstrated by the success of a touring production of George Aiken's dramatization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, performed at the Eagle Street Theater in 1848. Many other productions of the play would tour through Buffalo between 1850 and 1907. See Ardis Smith and Kathryn Smith. *Theater in Early Buffalo* (Buffalo: Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, 1975), 11-12.
  17. Upon her retirement from the concert circuit, Greenfield opened a voice studio in Philadelphia, where she lived out the rest of *her* life. See Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University, 2003), 177-78.
  18. *Buffalo Niagara African American Heritage Guide* (Buffalo Niagara Visitors Bureau, n.d.). 2.
  19. Lillian Serece Williams, *Strangers in a Land of Paradise: The Creation of an African American Community, Buffalo, New York, 2900-2940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 15.
  20. Smith and Smith, *Theater in Early Buffalo*.
  21. Although the group originally planned to meet at a hotel in Buffalo, at the last minute they relocated to nearby Fort Erie. Some accounts state that this transfer occurred due to racial discrimination, while others point out that a simultaneous convention of Elk Clubs may have filled up the city's hotels. See William Evitts, *Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society: The Niagara Movement*.
  22. Of particular note are Mary Talbert, who became the first black woman to win the NAACP's Spingarn Medal; her husband, William Talbert, a correspondent of W. E. B. Du Bois; and J. Edward Nash, pastor of Buffalo's Michigan Avenue Baptist Church and founding member of both the local NAACP and the Buffalo Urban League.
  23. Kraus, *Race, Neighborhoods, and Community Power*, 30.
  24. *Ibid.*, 38.
  25. See Shawn Lay's *Hooded Knights on the Niagara: The Ku Klux Klan in Buffalo, NY* (New York: New York University Press, 1995) for a detailed analysis of the Klan's rise in western New York.
  26. J. Levine stage-managed and Ed Price served as musical director. See Bernard L Peterson, *The African American Theatre Directory, 1816-1960* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1997), 225.
  27. Julius Cahn, *Julius Cahn-Gus Hilt Theatrical Guide*, cited in Smith and Smith's *Theatre in Early Buffalo*, 139.
  28. Hill and Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre*, 331.

29. Program: Federal Theatre Project, Works Progress Administration: Buffalo Historical Marionettes. Undated, though presumably 1937. Buffalo Historical Society Library and Archives.
30. The people in the picture are Mrs. Allan, Mrs. Beu, and Mrs. [Esther] Wilhelm. *Buffalo Historical Marionettes, 1936, Mrs. Esther B. Wilhelm*, Photograph, ID no. 76-30, Drama and Theater File, Buffalo Historical Society.
31. Joseph Better, "They Pull Strings and Puppets Do the Rest," *Work Relief Buffalo*. June 26, 1937.
32. Robert W. Zimmerman, "The Marionettes of the W.P.A.," *Dolt Reader, June-July 1988*, 156-60, clipping file: Federal Theatre, Buffalo Historical Society Library and Archives.
33. Similar confusion appears to have taken place within theatre scholarship. Although the Buffalo Historical Marionettes was not an official Negro Unit, in their accounts of the Federal Theatre, Ronald Ross, John O'Connor, and Lorraine Brown incorrectly list Buffalo among cities hosting Negro Units of the Federal Theatre Project. Perhaps due to this lack of designation, acclaimed histories of African Americans' contributions to the Federal Theatre have omitted discussion of the Buffalo unit. Examples include Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre 1935-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and E. Quilta Craig, *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).
34. Zimmerman, "The Marionettes of the W.P.A."
35. Practitioners from Buffalo contributed to Negro Units of the Federal Theatre Project beyond the Niagara region. Nelson Baurne, the set designer for *Run Little Chillun'*, an acclaimed production of the Los Angeles Negro Unit, came from Buffalo.
36. Krause, *Race, Neighborhoods, and Community Power*, 43.
37. Henry Louis Taylor Jr., *African Americans and the Rise of Buffalo's Post-Industrial City, 1940-Present* (Buffalo: Buffalo Urban League, 1990), 8.
38. The first wave of the Great Migration took place following the outbreak of World War I. African Americans came to the city from all over the South, especially Virginia, Georgia, Mississippi, Kentucky, Maryland, the Carolinas, and the District of Columbia, seeking jobs beyond the service sector in the local steel and railroad industry. See Williams, *Strangers in the Land of Paradise*, 29.
39. Taylor, *African Americans and the Rise of Buffalo*, 8.
40. Bullins, *Goin' a Buffalo*, 401.
41. A 1967 civil rights suit filed against the Bethlehem Steel Corporation, the largest manufacturing employer in the Buffalo area and the fourth-largest steel plant in the country, received national attention. Reflecting nationwide trends, blatant discrimination was proven in hiring practices, job assignment, and promotion. The case reflected common employment trends of the period in Buffalo, especially in construction. See Kraus, *Race, Neighborhoods, and Community Power*, 39-40.
42. Taylor, *African Americans and the Rise of Buffalo*, 9.
43. *Ibid.*, 10.
44. I make this claim carefully, referring to the masses of Africans from different communities forced into compartments together on slave ships bound for America.
45. Hatch and Shine, *Black Theatre LISA*, 392.
46. *Buffalo Niagara African American Heritage Guide*, 26. The club still operates successfully today, and its members give free jazz lessons to community youth and hold weekly jam sessions on Sunday nights.

47. Taylor, *African Americans and the Rise of Buffalo*, 14. According to Taylor, the block club may have been one of the 'most widespread and important organizations in the African American community.' These groups dealt with *sensitive* issues and problems, launched community development projects, and frequently had contact with elected officials. Despite their presence, they did not incorporate city youth into their activities, and they actively blamed young men for creating an unsafe atmosphere in the city through activities ranging from littering and loitering to selling drugs and engaging in thievery.
48. Adolph Dupree, 'What's Wrong with Negro Theatre,' *Buffalo evening News*, October 23, 1963, 6.
49. Ed Smith, "Both Blacks, Whites Need Black Buffalo Theater," *Buffalo Evening News*, February 1, 1969, sec. B9.
50. Smith, who would become an award-winning director, founded the now-defunct Buffalo Black Drama Workshop in the late 1960s. In the 1980s he served as the founder and artistic director of Buffalo Black Dinner Theatre. Hill's Ujima Company, then, was not *the* first African American theatre company in Buffalo, but it remains the most enduring by far, having celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 2009.
51. In 1960, African Americans made up 13.3 percent of Buffalo's total population. Due to the immigration of African Americans into the city and the outpouring of white middle-class citizens to the suburbs, by 1980 that percentage had grown to 26.6 percent, and by 1990 it was 30.7 percent. See Kraus, *Race, Neighborhoods, and Community Power*, 44, for additional figures.
52. Hill began Ujima with twenty-nine artists: twenty-four African Americans, three Puerto Ricans, one Native American, and one Caucasian. Lorna C. Hill, telephone interview with the author, June 16, 2009.
53. Hill interview.
54. Ujima Company, Inc., <http://www.ujimalheatre.org>.
55. The African American population density of Buffalo's East Side increased from 55 percent in 1960 to 81 percent in 1980 (where it remained in 1990). See Kraus, *Race, Neighborhoods, and Community Power*. 44, for additional figures.
56. Rose Ciotta, "Heart and Soul: Lorna Hill, the Guiding Light of the Ujima Company, Is a Buffalo Diva." *Buffalo Magazine of the Buffalo News*, April 16, 1989, 7.
57. *Ibid.*, 8.
58. Hill interview.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Ciotta, "Heart and Soul," 8.



Figure 1. An "African native" performs for white onlookers in the African Village, Pan American Exposition of 1901. Photo courtesy of The Buffalo Museum of Science.



Figure 2. Rev. J. Edward Nash and James A. Ross at the Negro Exhibit, Pan American Exposition of 1901. Courtesy of Uncrowned Queens Institute for Research and Education on Women, Inc. Photo courtesy of Buffalo and Erie County Public Library.

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# Gazetteer and Guide

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EDITED BY JAMES A. ROSS.

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Figure 3. *The Gazetteer and Guide*, a "Monthly Colored Magazine." Image courtesy of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library.



Figure 4. Mrs. Allan, Mrs. Beu, and Mrs. (Esther) Wilhelm with marionettes. Photo courtesy of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.



Figure 5. The Colored Musicians Club in the late 1940s, including Dizzy Gillespie on the piano and Miles Davis standing in the doorway. Photo courtesy of The Colored Musicians Club of Buffalo, New York.



Figure 6. The Ujima Theatre Company in 2006. Rear: Amilcar Cabral Hill, Robert Ball, Rahwa Ghirmat-zion, Zoë Viola Scruggs, Brandon Williamson, Adair Luhr, Philip Knoerzer, Catherine Horton; Middle: Beverly J. Dove, Lawrence Sayres, Tankla Shedrick with Resen Shedrick; Front: Asa Biniarn Hill, Lorna C. Hill, Raynardo Shedrick, Donald Capers. Photo courtesy of Lorna C. Hill, Ujima Theatre Company.