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Barfield and Christian: Acknowledging Unrecognized Theorization in *Blue Door*

Tanya Barfield's *Blue Door* is a womanist story being told through the embodied experience of Black men in their inherited traumas, their vulnerabilities, and the sharing of stories. In Barfield's contrast of the largely logical Lewis and the spirits of his male ancestors, she calls on the wisdom of Barbara Christian's essay, *The Race for Theory*, in her depiction of healing and truth being found in the intimacy of the personal as opposed to the rigidity of theoretical laws. The playwright explores how white patriarchal notions of masculinity emphasize a search for empirical truth and academic success as affirmation and self-fulfillment, especially for a Black man within a historically white institution and field, while rejecting a history of oppression that is more conveniently left in the past for those already in power. Barfield uses math as a substitute for the hegemonic "theory" discussed by Christian, and uses oral histories to access a new openness and understanding in Lewis and her audience.

At moments of peak vulnerability, it is characteristic of the protagonist to retreat from the stories of the past into a frenzied mathematical craze with no solutions in sight, and he finds no peace in the play until he finally lets himself be instructed, literally, by his own history and identity. In Barbara Christian's essay, she acknowledges that in academia especially, but also at large, Black people are "seen as a discredited people, [and] it is no surprise, then, that our creations are also discredited" (Christian 351). Discrediting, in Barfield's play, comes in the form of the emasculation of Lewis by numerous individuals from his memory including his father, his students, and white colleagues. Most of this emasculation is tied, in some form, to his Blackness being brought into the public eye and shamed in one way or another: being too black or not black enough for the liking of the beholder, whatever criteria they hold for that category. When Lewis is recalling—or being forced by an ancestor's story to recall—difficult memories, he often disconnects from the narrative by exclaiming "Think about math!" (Barfield 26). He seeks safety in its simplicity and its structure, but it is clear that his comfort with the material is not enough to make him comfortable. This can be seen when he is describing his thought process at the tea party with his white colleagues and extremely anxious about how he is being seen:

A series of broken numbers cascade down on me. Air sucks itself out of my lungs. I must make myself indistinguishable, I think. I must distinguish myself. I must become the pale, chalk-drawn shadow of success. I contemplate the square root of negative one (Barfield 27).

The way that Lewis thinks about his positionality within white spaces is the kind of unrecognized "theorizing, of necessity" (Christian 356) that people of color do daily in order to survive. The way that he considers his "sensation of being watched... [becoming] two selves—myself and the self that watches myself" (Barfield 12) is the kind of disregarded theory that doesn't fit neatly in the way that people have been told to identify the self in a white, hegemonic way. While readers are primed with W.E.B. DuBois' quote about "double consciousness" before the play begins, Lewis is discovering the concept for the first time in the moment and theorizing as he goes.

Blue Door is a series of stories bursting their way into Lewis's consciousness, who has effectively shut his personal history out of his life in favor of pursuing mathematics. In the end, it is connecting with the stories of his family history that soothe his fears and allow him and his ancestors to finally rest. Barbara Christian associates this need for narrative with the Black experience:

Our [Black] theorizing...is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? (Christian 349)

Her emphasis on survival and the drive to persevere is important for the story that Barfield is telling. Each of the ancestors that visit Lewis need to remind him of a story where they suffered for their race and their intelligence, but persisted nonetheless. Lewis is disconnected from his Blackness, associating the term and identity with "ignorance" and a lack of "intellectual parity" (Barfield 18), wanting to distance himself from his history and project himself into an imagined earned mobility due to his proximity to whiteness. Throughout the play, it is the willingness to participate in shared song that indicates Lewis's softening resistance to associating with his family. It is the Yoruban song shared with his great-grandfather in the end that shows that he has, even "hesitantly," embraced his heritage as well as the strength that is his Blackness at least for this night. It took engagement with the narratives being told to him for that to finally occur.

The profound project tackled by Tanya Barfield in this play deals with gender, race, the definitions of intelligence, and the ways that individuals theorize their lives in relation to the world around them. Despite the maleness of every character, womanism is being addressed in the way that toxic aspects of masculinity are being dissected and rejected, like the prioritization of "truth" over the emotional or aggression in the face of vulnerability. Barfield is using familial stories and oral histories to help a contemporary Black man find his place in the world and in his own body, reflecting the ideas of Barbara Christian's *Race for Theory* in Lewis's ruminations and constant verbalized interiority through monologue and song.

Works Cited

Barfield, Tanya. *Blue Door: A Play with Original Songs*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2007.

Christian, Barbara. "The Race for Theory." In *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell, 348- 359. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994.