



Volume 12, 2023

“With and Against the Archive”:
Researching and Performing African American Archival Lacunas as Acts of Worldmaking

By Christine Woodworth

“How does one tell impossible stories?” In her essay “Venus in Two Acts,” Saidiya Hartman raises this question and models her approach: “critical fabulation.”¹ Hartman reckons with the real and archival deaths of countless unnamed Black women subject to the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade, crafting a resistant storytelling mode that unsettles historical narratives and illuminates the violence of the archive. She describes her method of writing practice, contending “It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive.”² During the summer of 2021, Hobart and William Smith Colleges Theatre students Anthony Bray ‘23, Samari Brown ‘24, Sal Fabio ‘22, and Christina Roc ‘24 similarly grappled with impossible stories as they collectively created *From Beyond: Geneva’s Unheard Voices* under the auspices of a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship. The students conducted archival research on the history of African Americans in the small, upstate New York city of Geneva, between 1857 and 1953. They pored over archival artifacts, census records, 19th century newspapers, maps, and a series of historical sites. They then translated the stories of un- and under-represented figures into a

series of monologues and short scenes. They explored the techniques of playwrights who write/right/wright history, to create scripts that evoked, as playwright Kyle Bass shared with them, a “truth truer than fact.” These pieces were workshopped with local historians, theatre artists, and several members of the local Black community—including some of the descendants and relatives of the people that were depicted in the production. The script was produced in September 2021 as an outdoor theatrical walking tour, embedded throughout Geneva’s downtown neighborhood. In *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity*, Dorinne Kondo describes “reparative creativity” as “the way artists make, unmake, remake race in their creative processes, in acts of always partial integration and repair.”³ The process of creating *From Beyond: Geneva’s Unheard Voices* enacted “reparative creativity” by remaking race, transforming historiography into performance, and effecting archival activism.

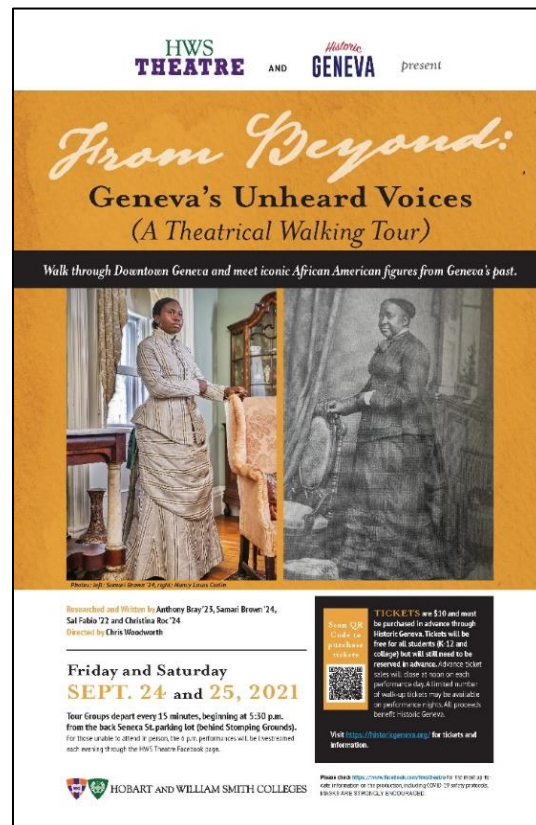


Fig. 1 Poster for HWS Theatre and Historic Geneva production of *From Beyond: Geneva’s Unheard Voices*.

The “givenness” and goals of the *From Beyond* project

Saidiya Hartman writes, “As a writer committed to telling stories, I have endeavored to represent the lives of the nameless and the forgotten, to reckon with loss, and to respect the limits of what cannot be known.”⁴ Hartman’s writing was a central pillar of our dramaturgy of historical adaptation, and we returned to her work at each stage: research, script development, casting and rehearsal, and production.⁵ Her writing offered a framework for encountering unknowability and deliberate erasure as well as strategies to create space for silences to speak. Building on Hartman’s provocative questions in “Venus in Two Acts,” we raised several of our own. Why, in a rural city with a present-day Black community that comprises more than 10% of the population, had there been so little attention paid to the history of that community? How do you tell those stories if the pieces are fragmented or missing? What do we do with the gaps, lacunas, empty spaces, and erasures in the archives? Bridging, filling in, or eliminating archival absences would have effectively amplified the historical (and real) violence done to the figures whose stories are partially or wholly missing. *From Beyond: Geneva’s Unheard Voices* was “written with and against the archive,” adamantly refusing pablum or closure and situating the unknowable in tension with the possible.

Oscillating “with and against the archive” created space for texts and performances that did not purport to fix or solve the violence of the archive. Rather, the processes through which the students created and performed the texts were acts of reparative creativity through their enactments of what Kondo describes as worldmaking. Kondo writes, “‘Worldmaking’ evokes sociopolitical transformation and the impossibility of escaping power, history, and culture. Worlds, like language, are pregiven, and remaking must always work with this givenness.”⁶ Part

of the givenness of this project had to do with the institutional and organizational histories (and hegemonies) and partly to do with the people in the room and their respective histories and identities. There is a power / privilege differential between me, the students, and the institution. Hobart and William Smith Colleges (HWS) is a PWI (predominantly white institution) but the demographics of the students in the Theatre department are far more diverse than the general student population. As a white faculty member among an all-white faculty / staff department with an exceptionally diverse student body, this project was an opportunity to de-center whiteness as both author and subject matter; facilitate connections between students, organizational partners, and members of local Black communities; and foster paid scholarly and creative experiences for students. However, Kondo succinctly argues, “While the arts are important sites for imaginative play, the imagination never transcends the social and political.”⁷ We continuously acknowledged the inescapability of my whiteness and privilege, the power dynamic between students and professor, the anti-Black legacies of the collaborating institutions and organizations, and the subsequent limits imposed by such “givenness.” This acknowledgement was not merely a capitulation to the histories and systemic injustices. Rather, acknowledgement of the “givenness” was essential to the process of researching and creating texts that disrupted and dismantled the legacies that had heretofore relegated the stories of African Americans in Geneva to footnotes, generalizations, or erased them almost completely.

From Beyond: Geneva’s Unheard Voices was a collaboration with Historic Geneva, our local historical society, who served as co-producers of the fall production. This was the third script in the “From Beyond” series, constituting another historical facet of “givenness.” In addition to grappling with the gaps and erasures in the archives reaching back two hundred years, the prior scripts of the “From Beyond” series were similarly worked “with and against.” Like

many historical societies, these iterations of performed histories began as cemetery tours. The program originated in the mid-1990s and was named *Gone But Not Forgotten*. The first of the series was researched and written by high school AP History students in 1994 and focused on Civil War-era figures.⁸ The second iteration, created in 1996, was set in an historic residential neighborhood, just two blocks away from the original cemetery version but encompassing a similar period. I collaborated with Historic Geneva in 2014 to stage a revival of the original 1994 cemetery play. I helped them rebrand the production as *From Beyond: Washington St. Cemetery Stories*, in the hopes that future versions of the “From Beyond” series could be created, focusing on different neighborhoods, communities, or even cemeteries.



Fig. 2 Cast photo of 2014 revival of 1994 Historic Geneva script, originally titled *Gone But Not Forgotten* and renamed *From Beyond: Washington Street Cemetery Stories*. Photo by author.

In each of the scripts from the 1990s, there was one token Black character. In fact, it was the same figure for each of the productions. No other characters crossed over. There were even two versions of the monologue, allowing for small shifts in the text if the role were cast with a male-

identified actor as George Bland or a female-identified actor as his wife Mary Jane. This consolidation of the Blands across productions and genders reveals how the archives and institutions foregrounded and emphasized the historical narratives of white residents of the community. It also implies a deeply problematic reality: the theatre community in Geneva in the mid-1990s would have struggled to create an environment in which Black actors would have felt welcome and supported enough to audition for the early history productions. The shift between George and Mary Jane, dependent upon actors' availability, indicates the ways in which Black history was minimized, sidelined, and generalized. The 1994 and 1996 scripts were packed full of information but not much theatricality. The goal for the newest addition to the "From Beyond" series was to radically aesthetically re-imagine this series by crafting reparative texts that dramatized the individual humanity of each of the figures depicted. The students were determined to write compelling and artful scripts that affectively and intellectually engaged their audiences, leaving them with a series of vexing and provocative historiographical questions.

Researching and writing "with and against the archive"

We were fortunate in that there was a book on the African American community in Geneva that had been published in 1995. Part archival research and part oral history, *Make a Way Somehow: African American Life in a Northern Community, 1790-1965* by Kathryn Grover offered an overview of many families from the late 18th to the mid-20th century.⁹ The history of the African American community in Geneva commences with the involuntary arrival of enslaved people in the late 18th century, brought north by the families that held them in bondage and forced labor. Following New York State's eventual abolition of slavery, many formerly enslaved people left the area while others found employment in homes and on farms. Over the course of the nineteenth century, other Black families moved into Geneva. Eventually a thriving African

American neighborhood emerged in the center of the city and boasted schools, churches, businesses, and residential real estate. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, a concerted movement by town leaders eventually pushed Black families from the neighborhood, setting off what would become a housing crisis that persists today. There were several Black-owned businesses in downtown Geneva in the nineteenth century, although they were in the minority. Short-term and long-term housing was nearly impossible to come by because African American men were excluded from many rental and purchase opportunities. A handful of boarding houses and one Black-owned hotel could accommodate some—but not all—of the housing needs.

Grover's book served as a key starting point and was especially useful as a narrative anchor for the students, who had little to no archival experience. Throughout the research phase of the project, we worked closely with Becky Chapin, Archivist at Historic Geneva. In some instances, the students were able to look at some of the same primary source materials Grover consulted to write *Make a Way Somehow*. Hartman writes warily of researching official documents in her monograph *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, noting that even resistant readings run the risk of “reinforcing the authority of these documents.” This is particularly fraught because they “remain entangled with the politics of domination.”¹⁰ By reading the Grover book, exploring archives, questioning how each artifact came to be preserved and catalogued, and speculating on the vast numbers of artifacts lost or disappeared, the students conducted what we might call a historiography of wariness—beholden to the archives while also deeply skeptical. Several of the students delved even deeper than Grover, moving past what informed the book, and seeking additional primary sources outside of Historic Geneva.

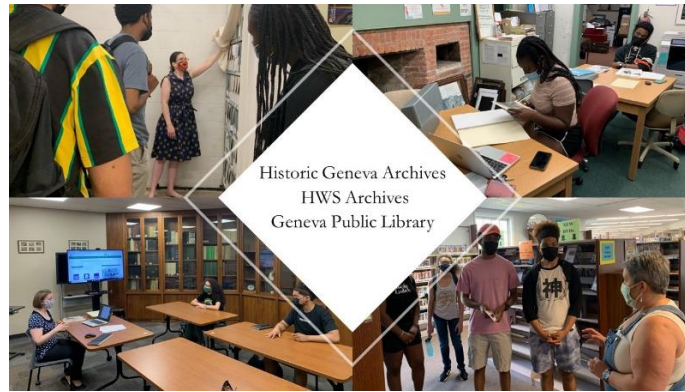


Fig. 3 Collage of photos showing the sites where students conducted archival research, including some of the archivist and library staff who assisted: Becky Chapin, Archivist at Historic Geneva (top left), Tricia McEldowney, HWS Archivist and Special Collections Library (bottom left), and Susan Flick, Adult Services Library Technician at Geneva Public Library (bottom right).

Some figures were represented prominently in the archives. One example was Robert Linzy, a World War II veteran, who served in the 761st Tank Battalion, also known as the Black Panthers, which fought under Patton for over 180 consecutive days. Anthony Bray wrote and performed this piece. Historic Geneva houses several materials related to Linzy including his footlocker and helmet.



Fig. 4 Anthony Bray poses in front of display case featuring materials related to Robert Linzy and 761st Tank Battalion, including his footlocker and helmet. Photo by author.

There is also a published pamphlet on the history of the 761st Battalion, numerous newspaper articles, and photographs. Anthony was drawn to the story of the 761st and set his monologue, “Robert Linzy: Something Worth Fighting For (1944),” on the eve of battle. The Black Panther insignia with the motto “come out fighting” became the inspiration for an imagined rallying speech to fellow battalion members. In performance the audience was cast as those soldiers.



Fig. 5 Anthony Bray performs as Robert Linzy in front of live audience in downtown Geneva. Photo by author.

Other figures were mentioned fleetingly in the book or in the archives. But some of these small mentions were packed with intriguing details that drew the students to explore more. One key example was Nancy Lucas Curlin. Curlin had been a teacher in Geneva. She married and moved to Jamaica, where she taught for many years. She eventually moved back to Geneva, but the reasons why were not known. As a student in our Education program, Samari Brown was drawn to Curlin because of her profession. Yet there were scant materials in the archives to tell her story. The dearth of materials related to Nancy Lucas Curlin was maddeningly frustrating. A

short newspaper obituary indicated that she was buried in Washington St. Cemetery (ironically the site of the very first “From Beyond”). Since it was just a few blocks from campus we walked over one afternoon to try to locate her grave. The African American section of the cemetery is missing many gravestones and those that have survived are in poor condition. After roaming through the entire cemetery, we were unable to find a single stone with her name or the names of any relative. A consultation of the cemetery map in the Historic Geneva archives revealed that her name was not listed anywhere. Was the obituary wrong and she was buried somewhere else? Was she missing from the map because she wasn’t deemed worthy of the record? Was it a clerical error? We were never able to answer any of those questions with anything other than speculation.

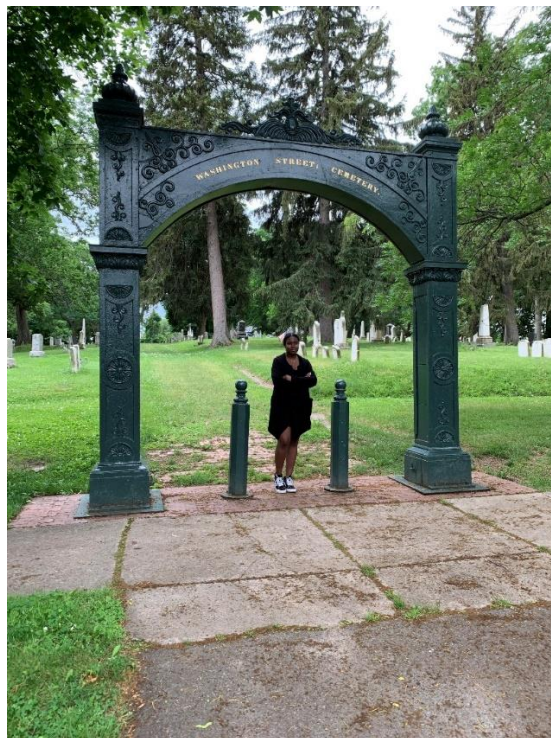


Fig. 6 Samari Brown poses in front of the gates to Washington St. Cemetery, where Nancy Lucas Curlin is allegedly buried although there is no record of her gravesite other than a mention in her obituary. Photo by author.

Samari connected with Sara Greenleaf, one of our campus librarians to conduct genealogy research. Using census records, property maps, and old city directories, she was able

to locate the elementary school and church where Curlin once taught. Expanding her view to the larger neighborhood, she was able to craft a fleeting glimpse of what was once a thriving Black community, even known for a time as Liberia.¹¹ Over the years, however, Black residents were gradually driven out of this central neighborhood. For Samari, the question of why Curlin would leave Jamaica to return to a much less hospitable Geneva, became the central dramatic question in her piece “Nancy Lucas Curlin: God Bless the Children (1876)” “Why did I leave only to return?” became the refrain of the monologue as Samari’s rendition of Curlin reflected on the challenges of educating Black children in the 1880s—under colonial occupation in Jamaica and in a racist community like 19th century Geneva.



Fig. 7 Samari Brown performs as Nancy Lucas Curlin in front of live audience in downtown Geneva. Photo by author.

Sometimes a meta-critique of archival lacunas was embedded in the monologues or scenes themselves. For example, Christina Roc researched a woman named Marie Gray, who ran a boarding house for the hundreds of Black men who came through the area to work but were denied access to most other housing options following WWII. There is little about her in the historical record. In “Marie Gray: Over Beds of Men, Weep Sunlight (1944),” Christina imagines

Marie with a blank journal in hand, contemplating how to tell her own story. She has paused while changing the sheets on a bed. She ultimately throws down her blank journal, exclaiming, “The remaining pages can stay blank so long as I have work to do— In fact, scrub the others clean! Make it so we never existed at all! What are records against human lives— look here, these beds *NEVER GET COLD!*”



Fig. 8 Christina Roc performs as Marie Gray at final dress rehearsal on the HWS campus. Photo by author.

One of Sal Fabio’s pieces (co-authored with Samari) featured the Geneva and HWS icon Arthur Kenney. This piece provided an opportunity for a community actor to join the cast as Kenney’s wife in “Arthur Kenney and Mary Georgetta Cleggett Kenney: The Spirit of Us (1953).”



Fig. 9 Community member Sydney Moore and Sal Fabio perform as Mary Georgetta Cleggett Kenney and Art Kenney, respectively, in front of live audience in downtown Geneva. Photo by author.

Through their dialogue, we learn of the pivotal role Kenney played in the life of the Geneva business community as well as the life of HWS.



Fig. 10 Sal Fabio poses in Arthur Kenney's replica letterman's sweater. The original is housed in the HWS Archives. Photo by author.

The other two pieces that were included in the script were performed by actors who did not participate in the research and writing process. Sal authored a poetic monologue “Daniel Prue: Nearly a Slave (1857),” performed by then first year student Rafael Vasquez.



Fig. 11 Rafael Vasquez performs as Daniel Prue in front of a live audience in downtown Geneva. Photo by author.

In this piece, Prue has just escaped from the man who tricked him into journeying to Ohio, only to attempt to sell him into enslavement. Sal consulted court records, newspaper accounts, photographs, and a letter that Prue wrote to his father as he made his way back to Geneva. As part of his research for the role, Rafael also visited the Historic Geneva archives to see firsthand the letter and other materials related to Prue’s escape. Rafael’s interest in the archival material was partly inspired by the enthusiasm of the four-student researcher-writers and the ways in which they discussed their summer research and playwriting with the rest of the cast.



Fig. 12 Rafael Vasquez and Historic Geneva Archivist Beck Chapin examine materials related to Daniel Prue. Photo by author.

The sixth piece in the script “Henry McDonald: Playing the Game (1974)” was performed by another non-student actor, Kevin “KJ” Johnson. KJ is a staff member at HWS and regularly performs in our departmental productions. Co-authored by Christina and Anthony, the monologue reveals McDonald speaking to himself in a mirror, reflecting on his professional football career and determining that he will no longer “play the game” of assimilation. Similar to all the monologues and scenes except for Robert Linzy, the audience are unseen witnesses to private moments.



Fig. 13 Kevin “KJ” Johnson performs as Henry McDonald in front of live audience in downtown Geneva. Photo by author.

“You are not there to defend yourselves”: feedback and the anti-racist writing workshop

As with our archival research, we sought to disrupt traditional power models in our approach to playwriting. In her book *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*, Priya Parker describes something that she terms “generous authority,” noting that, “a gathering run on generous authority is run with a strong, confident hand, but it is run selflessly, for the sake of others.” Her philosophy on gathering uses examples ranging from dinner parties to classrooms to restorative justice meetings. Regardless of the reason for a gathering, she charges hosts to protect, equalize, and connect their guests.¹² Generous authority encapsulates my approach to the classroom and to summer research. I appreciate that this concept does not obscure the always-present power differential between faculty and students. However, it offers ways of deploying that power as a means of creating community and belonging among all who gather. Recognizing that the process of sharing drafts of creative writing can often be fraught, we used several small exercises throughout the early days of the summer fellowship to rehearse the process for sharing and responding to each other’s work. Short playwriting prompts were embedded throughout the first week to prime the students for drafting their scripts. The students also read plays, bringing in monologues they thought were strong and breaking down the components. These smaller activities were a means of giving them space to share their writing or impressions of others’ writing in a supportive and relatively low-stakes way. They also served to build community and camaraderie among the group.

Given my identity as a white woman and the intense nature of the experiences of the selected historic figures, it was doubly necessary to read texts by diverse authors and to bring in

guests whose identities were markedly different than mine. In *Worldmaking*, Kondo explicates several examples of “theoretical practices [that] destabilize the disembodied Master Subject.” Among the techniques she lists was “playwriting that crosses scholar-artist divides, dramatizing the afterlives of historical trauma.”¹³ As part of our Fellowship, we were allotted funds to bring in an area speaker and so I invited Kyle Bass, Resident Playwright at Syracuse Stage.¹⁴ He delivered a public talk on writing history-based plays in which he shared that what he strives for in his writing is a “truth truer than fact.” While our winter 2021 production (which had been written by students) had started with a kernel of history and leapt into wildly fantastic fictions, we wanted the *From Beyond* pieces to be anchored to archival material while simultaneously calling attention to the violence of erasure and the contemporary reverberations and resonances of the challenges faced by the figures the students would ultimately resurrect through performance.



Fig. 14 Poster advertising Kyle Bass talk and photo of student researchers with Bass (center). Photo by author.

Once they began writing the monologues and scenes for the production, the students responded to drafts using a modified version of Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process. As

anyone who has used this methodology in the past knows, it takes time and care, but it is well worth it. In *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*, Felicia Rose Chavez shares the ways in which her past experiences in writing workshops reified hegemonic power structures through silence. She notes this included the practice of having a writer remain silent while their work is critiqued. In her predominantly white classes (which often featured all-white reading lists), it also meant “the nearly complete omission of writers of color in person and print. It is as though we do not exist.”¹⁵ Throughout the summer we centered the writer(s) whose work-in-progress was shared, shaping our discussions to what they needed or wanted in response to a draft. Chavez also underscores the transformative nature of this process, citing Lerman’s work as a crucial resource. She argues, “The anti-racist model empowers the author to moderate their own workshop while participants rally in service of the author’s vision.”¹⁶ Chavez notes that Lerman’s artist-centered approach “trains participants in how to check their egos, exercise kinship, and read in service of the author’s agenda.”

We used Lerman’s process for the works-in-progress sharing session in which we invited members of Black communities (some even descendants or relatives of some of the figures dramatized), staff from the historical society, and colleagues on campus from Theatre and Africana studies. In the invitation I shared the process with them, so they knew what they were committing to. I also provided a handout once they arrived for the session and then spent some time explaining in person how it would work. And then I had to firmly but gently redirect when attendees tried to enthusiastically offer advice or jump to discussions of the subject matter before we reached that stage of the process. All in all, it went extremely well, with all our invited guests offering deliberate, exacting, yet kind feedback to the students.¹⁷

We had another guest artist visit us via Zoom, playwright Harrison David Rivers. We read some of his writing and the students were then able to ask him questions grounded in his dramatic material. Harrison spoke with the students on the eve of works-in-progress session, which was fortuitous and timely. He stressed the importance of letting go of feedback that does not feed them or the work. “You are not there to defend yourselves,” he reassured them. This advice especially resonated with Samari, who wrote in her reflection at the end of the summer:

As a playwright, I learned that what I want is what I can have and, I have the freedom to choose what I want it to be. I’m very thankful for this project because if someone [previously] were to give me a suggestion, without a doubt I would take it and transform my writing into something that I wouldn’t want it to be. Being surrounded by this group, I came to the realization that it is my work and if I didn’t want it to be changed, I didn’t have to change it. The moment that I realized this was in the Zoom with Harrison Rivers. He said to us: ‘You are not there to defend yourself’ in feedback. And the first thing that I always do is defend myself. I’ve moved on from defending, taking someone else’s suggestions, putting them in my back pocket, and deciding on my own whether I want to take it or not. It’s one of the best things I’ve learned.¹⁸

“Jeopardizing the status of the event” through Tour Guides Lyric and Cypher

We wanted to both create vivid, seamless characterizations of the real figures depicted while also directly addressing the gaps and holes in the archives. To accomplish this dual goal, we wove through two tour guide characters who served as the bridge between the audience and the historic figures: Lyric and Cypher. The students and I were adamant that these both be juicy

acting roles and not just a means of regurgitating facts or leading audience groups from one location to the next. Hartman writes, “By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. By throwing into crisis ‘what happened when’ and by exploiting the “transparency of sources” as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives.”¹⁹ Through their conflict with one another as well as the plot arc of their scenes across the entire performance, Lyric and Cypher repeatedly destabilized any sense of pat or easy history and instead, perpetually “jeopardize[d] the status of the event” by underscoring the historiographical challenges of research and the anti-Black actions of the community throughout history.

Lyric and Cypher scaffolded several storytelling functions. First, they served as the overarching framing device that encapsulated all the monologues and scenes—hosts for a time travel tourism company. Striving to create monologues and scenes that were much more avowedly theatrical than the original 1994 and 1996 scripts meant that sometimes aesthetic originality came at the expense of historical context. The tour guide scripts were therefore a means of communicating more contextual information about each historic figure. More poignantly, however, the conversations—and conflict—between Lyric and Cypher foregrounded the historiographical challenges of this research. Lyric was the senior guide, and Cypher was the trainee. As Cypher learned how to lead the time traveling tours, they repeatedly questioned Lyric and challenged the complacency and slow pace of social change. Taken together, their scenes had a somewhat traditional linear plot structure, leading to a climactic moment when Cypher indicted Lyric and others who have complacently retold historical narratives without attempting

to change the course of history. By the time they returned the tour groups back to the starting location, they each had a new perspective on history, race, and social justice.

In addition to their theatrical functions, the tour guide roles fulfilled a practical need as well. Since the fall theatre production is always a recruitment tool and we are under growing institutional pressure to increase the number of enrolled students, we needed to create more roles for performers of all genders and races.²⁰ In order to send audience tour groups out in waves, every 15 minutes, we needed at least 12 people to populate 6 tour guide partnerships. The tour guides were a diverse group in terms of race, nationality, gender, and age (since we also had community members in the production). We were able to sell tickets for specific time slots so that family and friends could make sure to see their chosen tour guide performer in action. Tour guides were easily recognizable with their bright red polo shirts, khaki pants, and badges emblazoned with the phrase “From Beyond.” Whether waiting for their tour to start or during the tour, audience members could usually see additional sets of guides who were leading the groups ahead or behind. This embodied proliferation of the Lyrics and Cyphers served to destabilize the authority of the narratives and call into question who was writing and sharing this history. As Kondo notes, “the script offers multiple, exciting possibilities, transformed and enflashed by the production [...] The fluid, open relations among script, production, and performance offer ways to think about performativity as openness within historically contingent possibilities and limits.”²¹ Witnessing bits and pieces of other group’s tour guides in addition to one’s own offered visual and/or auditory reminders that historical narratives are social constructions that are built and maintained similar to social and political structures.



Fig. 15 Tour Guides Derrielle Faulkner (Lyric) and Lillian Davis (Cypher) in front of live audience in downtown Geneva. Photo by author.

Collaboration as “activist intervention”

The students completed the research and writing portion of the project under the auspices of a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship and shifted to performing their roles through the HWS Theatre / Historic Geneva fall production (for which they then received academic credit for their acting). Kondo attests that “Collaboration as a member of a creative team more closely resembles a form of activist intervention.”²² Once again, we unsettled some of our conventional practices by empowering the students to engage in decision-making for the production and to work in several production capacities. Each performed signature roles within the piece and collectively we made casting decisions for the remaining roles. Their research, playwriting, and rehearsing culminated in the live, site-specific performance staged in Downtown Geneva September 24 and 25, 2021. Approximately 250 people attended the live production. Additionally, countless others witnessed the performance through the livestream on our HWS Theatre Facebook page (as well as through the archival recording, which remains available).²³ At the conclusion of the project, the students held their own public talk, “Black

Stories Matter,” in which they reflected on their research and writing process. They were thus instrumental in four public-facing, community-engaged scholarship events that welcomed campus and community audiences: Kyle Bass’s summer talk on history-based playwriting, the works-in-progress sharing of their scripts (which welcomed campus and community partners to offer impressions and feedback on the texts over the summer), the live (and live-streamed and recorded) performance of *From Beyond: Geneva’s Unheard Voices* and their Frame/Works talk on their process.²⁴ Each of these events further deepened the students’ engagement with the archives, the historic figures, and our audiences.

Kondo writes, “Theater is an especially rich site for investigating the nexus of race, power, aesthetics, and emotion/affect, for in the interactions between audience and performers, mobilizing the powers of the fleshy sensorium, theatrical performances can stage political and intellectual visions that *move* people.”²⁵ Kondo emphasizes *moves*, amplifying the multivalent meanings inherent to theatre production and reception. *From Beyond: Geneva’s Unheard Voices* similarly embraced the myriad definitions of *moves*. We displaced our fall production from our customary indoor theatre within the confines of our campus to a series of outdoor, public sites in the downtown area. Audiences walked from location to location, literally moving through space as the characters narratively traveled through a linear timeline of performance pieces. The affective responses were also indicative of how the production moved its witnesses and participants. Although the long-term implications of this project remain to be seen, the immediate institutional impacts were powerful. Kondo contends that “the work of minoritarian artists and scholars can be seen as creative attempts at reparation, to work through both the destructiveness of structural violence and our own desires for destructive vengeance. Integration and reparation are never complete—nor is the work of creativity.”²⁶ Indeed, Hartman asserts that

lack of completion is a hallmark of “critical fabulation” when she writes, “Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method.”²⁷

“It’s about time”—reflections on the *From Beyond* project

Collaborating with these four students over the course of that 6-week project was, hands-down, the best experience of 2021, and one of the best of my teaching career. I was exceptionally proud of the work they created. It was lyrical, theatrical, and offered a gut punch. All four ended up performing in their own pieces and we brought in other students and community members to portray the remaining historic figures and tour guides, bringing our cast total to 19. We donated all ticket proceeds to Historic Geneva. The HWS Theatre production and the students’ archival research revealed the necessity of continuing to collect and tell Geneva’s unheard stories.

Looking back, however, there are several areas that I would approach differently if I were to replicate this project. I underestimated the challenges of working through all the city and local business bureaucracy to secure a permit to perform. Six weeks with the students was not enough time. I should have taken the full eight weeks on offer for summer research OR I should have built more scaffolding for the project before the students came back to campus for the fellowship. Instead, we all made discoveries along the way and lost some time to exploration and discarded choices. I wish I had anticipated the challenges of the fall production BEFORE starting the research and writing work in the summer. I wish I had done more advanced outreach to connect more deeply to communities and organizations. We spoke fairly openly and transparently about the systems of power at play through the institution, the fellowship, with our community partners, and between them and me. Even so, the specter of white saviorism loomed. Although the students had a great deal of autonomy in terms of how they used their time for

archival research and writing, I wish I had facilitated opportunities for them to meet with local Black residents without me.

The work of Anthony Bray, Samari Brown, Sal Fabio, and Christina Roc will continue to echo and reverberate for many years to come. Even in the weeks and months following the production, the impact was evident and tangible. HWS Archivist and Special Collections librarian Tricia McEldowney credited Sal and Samari for bringing Art Kenney to her attention, noting that prior to the research, “Art wasn’t anywhere on my radar; now, however, I see how present he is throughout HWS’s historical record.” Tricia further asserts that Sal and Samari’s “study and storytelling of Art—‘Hobart’s greatest fan’ and a beloved Geneva citizen—has inspired me to include him in an exhibit this year for Hobart College’s Bicentennial.”²⁸ A few months after *From Beyond* closed, Historic Geneva announced they were embarking on a new oral history project, which is a follow-up to the original *Make a Way Somehow* research conducted in the early 1990s. Historic Geneva recognized the students as inaugural honorees for a new annual event that recognizes individuals, businesses, or organizations who are telling Geneva’s stories, past and present. Additionally, in spring 2022, the four students collectively received the campus award for Outstanding Engaged Student Scholarship for their work on this production. Any individual stage of this project—the archival research, the script development, casting and rehearsal, the performance—would have been sufficient grounds for this award. Taken together, this project was something of a trifecta, affording audiences, fellow collaborators, and community partners affective, intellectual, and emotional access to untold stories. They shined a spotlight on the people who are pivotal to Geneva’s history, lyrically illustrating the ways in which Black stories matter in the past, present, and future.

At the conclusion of the summer research fellowship, I invited the students to share their reflections on the process. I'll end by sharing Christina Roc's response, which illuminates the necessity and worldmaking potential of reparative creativity: "Black voices are voices that history seldom hears, unless they are the voices of the nameless collective known as 'slaves.'" Thus, this project has carved a beautiful path that hasn't existed, or at least, not in the same [way]. That's extremely important. I was even more convinced of its importance when [a Black community member] said "it's about time" for a project like this to be undertaken."²⁹



Fig. 16 Collage of production photos from *From Beyond: Geneva's Unheard Voices*, September 2021. Photos by author.

¹ Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 10-11.

² Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 12

³ Dorinne K. Kondo, *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018): 5.

⁴ Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4.

⁵ Although I was familiar with Hartman's writing, specifically *Scenes of Subjection*, I was introduced to this specific article through a HowIRound essay describing a new play project at the University of Memphis that deployed Hartman's approach of "critical fabulation," or, as the HowIRound authors write, "the combining of historical and archival research with critical theory and fictional narrative to fill in the blanks left in the historical record. It is both

a fleshing out and a problematizing of history.” Calley N. Anderson and Holly L. Derr, “Using Critical Fabulation for History-Based Playwriting,” *HowlRound*, March 3, 2021, <https://howlround.com/using-critical-fabulation-history-based-playwriting>.

⁶ Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 28.

⁷ Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 34.

⁸ I originated the role of Jeanette Eliza Sage Kelly in the 1994 production when I was a senior at Geneva High School.

⁹ Kathryn Grover, *Make a Way Somehow: African American Life in a Northern Community, 1790-1965* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 10-11.

¹¹ George Bland and his wife Mary Jane, whose story appears in the 1994 and 1996 scripts, were instrumental in the establishment and development of this neighborhood.

¹² Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters* (New York: Penguin, 2020): 81, 82-94.

¹³ Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 4.

¹⁴ At the time of his talk his position title was Associate Artistic Director.

¹⁵ Felicia Rose Chavez, *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2021):3.

¹⁶ Chavez, *Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*, 10.

¹⁷ Hobart and William Smith Colleges, “Staging Geneva’s Unheard Voices,” Daily Update, August 6, 2021, <https://hws.edu/news/current/staging-genevas-unheard-voices.aspx>. This article includes short video footage from the works-in-progress session with campus and community guests.

¹⁸ Samari Brown, Summer Research Reflection, June 28, 2021.

¹⁹ Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11.

²⁰ Students involved in HWS Theatre productions receive academic credit for acting or serving in a major technical production role. Productions count as a class and therefore our enrollment numbers are regularly under scrutiny.

²¹ Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 28.

²² Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 8.

²³ The archival recording is available for viewing via Box through this link: <https://hws.box.com/s/nkkw6e1y9k7y03lxurs5sz4xb94g5zg3>. To view the trailer for the production, visit: <https://youtu.be/-yPD9Z0d75U>.

²⁴ There was also a fifth event, organized by the Geneva Public Library. They scheduled a Book Club discussion of *Make A Way Somehow*, which was accompanied by a sneak preview performance of some script excerpts. However, other than the library staff member who organized the event, no one else attended. The students still shared their performance excerpts with the Adult Services Library Technician, Susan Flick, and discussed the book. But the event was cut short due to the lack of attendance.

²⁵ Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 25.

²⁶ Kondo, *Worldmaking*, 34.

²⁷ Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 12.

²⁸ Tricia McEldowney, email to author, January 20, 2022.

²⁹ Christina Roc, Summer Research Reflection, June 28, 2021.

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